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MIKE SHAYNE
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JULY, 1962 Vol. 11, No. 2

SHORT MYSTERY NOVEL

THE BODY IN THE BED
by FRANK STRUAN

In a spring-and-autumn marriage the bride can sometimes decide she'd look well in black. But murder, Johnny July knew, didn't always have to be that cut-and-dried.

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LEO MARGULIES
Publisher

CYLVIA KLEINMAN
Editorial Director

FRANK B. LONG
Associate Editor

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 11, No. 2 Published monthly by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC., 501 Fifth Avenue, N. Y. 17. Subcriptions, 12 issues $4.00; 24 issues $7.50; single copies 35¢. Second-class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious.

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July 1962. Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster—return 3579 to 501 Fifth Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

The Famed Redhead in Action—

MARGIN FOR TERROR

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Not all dangerous females may have murder on their minds. And what looks like a murder attempt may be something quite different from the start. But however the cards were stacked . . . Mike was taking no chances.

MICHAEL SHAYNE threaded his way easily through the orderly arrangement of checker-cloth tables to the one at the rear of the *Speak Easy* night club. Miami's newest night spot—with its Roaring Twenties, Chicago crime king atmosphere, the work of an expert in vanished-era decor—had been open now about three weeks. Only about a third of the tables were occupied with well-dressed Floridians sipping drinks and tackling three-inch steaks which were a specialty of the house. There was no band. Simply a small area of stage mounting like a dais from the center of the huddled tables where a dreamy-eyed lady sat idly playing honky-tonk piano, with the accent on the blue notes.

Shayne found the table under the painting of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. The man sitting there waved him to a chair. Shayne caught a first impression of well-cared for fat, expensive clothes and ring-studded fingers. There was a

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THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE THRILLER

bottle of champagne in the center of the checkered tablecloth.

"I'm Marvin Maltby," the man said. "Glad you could come, Shayne. Drink?"

Shayne shook his head. "Business first, I think. Your phone call to my secretary sounded pretty urgent."

"Miss Hamilton, wasn't it?" The man laughed and sipped from his champagne glass. "She sounded intelligent. Wonderful quality in a secretary."

The redhead smiled blankly. "I think she's great but that has nothing to do with you. Maybe you'd better tell me what this is all about, Maltby."

Maltby wasn't drunk yet but he was close to it. His round, fat face was a composite of small features lost in the wandering dough of a lot of excess flesh.

"This is my place, Shayne. My own idea. The real estaters and the wise guys told me I'd take a bath down here. That Miami wouldn't go for a new club tailored after the old Chicago speaks of prohibition days. But they may be wrong. We've been keeping our fingers crossed since opening night. This place could be a gold mine. I'm sure it'll catch on real soon."

The girl at the piano was picking her way noisily through *Chicago*. Shayne chuckled. "It certainly looks like something left over from *The Untouchables*. And I wish you luck. But it would be even nicer if you'd get down to facts."

Maltby patted the table top, leaning a little forward.

"Okay, Shayne. It's a fact that I'm a businessman. It's also a fact that I could use a private detective. Some one like you, who knows Miami and can steer me clear of trouble."

The redhead's eyes narrowed coldly. "You ought to know I don't hire out as a bodyguard. Nor do I push muscle at anybody, Maltby."

The eyes in the fat face glittered, but not with anger.

"I've got my own goon squad, Shayne. But none of them know Miami. What do you say? I can pay you eight hundred a week just to keep an eye on things for me."

"Sorry." Shayne rose to his feet. "If that's all you had to tell me, I'll be leaving. And I'll give you some advice. Chief Will Gentry is a good friend of mine. And also a very good cop. I'd play it straight down here, Maltby. You'll only get in trouble if you don't."

"Won't you reconsider, Shayne? A guy like you could go far with a guy like me." There was a desperate note of worry in the fat man's voice.

"No thanks, Maltby. This gun is not for hire."

Without waiting for a rejoinder, Shayne walked back the way he had come. He would have kept on going if the girl at the piano hadn't suddenly closed on a chord of mu-

sic and scampered down from the dais to block his egress from the *Speak Easy*.

She was no longer dreamy-eyed. Even as Shayne stared down at her, waiting for her to speak, he saw the alarm in her violet-shadowed eyes. The rest of her was a blue silk evening gown that hugged her figure seductively in all the proper places. Shayne liked her face. The mouth was good, the nose chiseled and the cheekbones beautifully gaunt.

"Mr. Shayne. I have to talk to you. Have you a minute?"

The redhead nodded warily. "This place have a bar?"

"Come on."

She tugged at his elbow. Shayne followed, knowing full well that Marvin Maltby had witnessed the whole thing. The redhead fought off a feeling of uneasiness. Something was radically wrong at the *Speak Easy* but he didn't know what it was.

There was a bar—out of sight behind a curtained alcove to the left of the checkroom and the main body of the place. It was dimly lit, still faithful to the Capone image, and there was one bartender on duty. He was reading a newspaper before three deep rows of bottles of all colors and descriptions.

Shayne looked at the girl. Her head was barely up to his chin.

"Your name is?"

"Evie. Evie Dane. I work here."

Shayne laughed. "I'm detective

enough to figure that one out for myself. What I can't figure is how you know my name and why you want to talk to me."

"Murder!"

"Come again?"

The bartender had put down his paper. The girl ordered a drink after Shayne held up his hand in negation. When the bartender left the drink and went back to his reading, Evie Dane raised frightened eyes to Shayne's face.

"I know you because I know Maltby sent for you. And he does need protection. Somebody is out to kill him. Didn't he tell you that?"

"No," Shayne said. "Maybe because I refused to help him. He

doesn't need me. He must be knee-deep in goons with guns by the look of him."

Surprisingly, Evie Dane shook her head. "He's a nice guy, Maltby. Doesn't try to make me do anything but sing for my supper. I love him for that. And he's no gangster like he lets on. Sure he has help in the club. Bouncers and waiters. But none of them are gunmen.

"He must have been putting on an act for you. He's no crook from the East. He's a sensitive, intelligent man who had a wonderful idea for a nightspot in Miami. Now somebody is trying to muscle in on him and he won't deal. And if he doesn't, they're sure to try and kill him."

While she had been talking, Shayne had kept his eyes busy. It was true, in a way. Past the first impression of a gaudy replica, he had become aware of the taste and imagination that had actually gone into the *Speak Easy*. The atmosphere of the whole club was rather more authentic than stagey.

"I wonder why he didn't level with me," Shayne murmured.

Evie Dane swallowed the rest of her drink. "He's scared. Too scared to think straight."

"I see."

"Do you, Shayne? Then why don't you go back out there and help him?"

The appeal in the girl's voice and eyes was genuine too. The redhead frowned. "This is really something for the Miami police to handle. I'll talk to Maltby. If he needs protection, he should get it from the proper source. Come on, you can sit in. Maybe blue eyes will help more than blunt words, from someone who knows what the wrong kind of stubbornness can lead to."

They were starting through the curtain that closed over the alcove when a blast of gunfire rolled around the *Speak Easy*. In the brief terrifying silence that followed, a woman screamed. The scream ended on a choking gurgle.

Shayne growled and vaulted into the main room. One swift look over the crowded tables was sufficient. It told him where the trouble was even if he couldn't exactly pin it down. The attention of every person in the club was the table where Shayne had left Marvin Maltby sitting.

Nobody was trying to leave. Shayne pushed his way through the mass of tables and bodies blocking him. When he reached the perimeter of the table, he halted in contemplation.

Marvin Maltby was sagging weakly against his chair. His face was ashen, and gleaming with sweat, and he was hugging himself, his arms interlaced over the area of his heart. But he was alive and breathing.

His eyes flashed recognition as Shayne bent over him quickly. "I told you, Shayne—" It was a gasp

for breath. "They're out to get me. But I was smart—oh, how it hurts!" His breath let out in a wide fan which billowed the redhead's tie.

Mike Shayne knew just how smart Marvin Maltby was. His probing fingers made contact with a steel corset of some kind that could only be a bullet-proof vest.

II

LUCY HAMILTON'S lovely face was eager and expectant above the pyramid of her folded fingers. Her eyes were riveted on Michael Shayne as he lit a cigarette, and dropped the match into an ashtray at the edge of her desk.

"Go on, Michael. Don't stop there."

The redhead sighed. "That's it, angel. The shot and all that confusion! I made sure nobody left until Will Gentry showed up. But we didn't find the gun on any of the fifty odd people that were in the place. But Will has his men going over every inch of it now. It's got to turn up. That was a gunshot I heard. Not a firecracker."

"But couldn't this Maltby have been merely—"

Shayne grinned. "Way ahead of you, angel. No, we stood by while he slipped the bullet-proof gizmo off. He had a bruise over his rib cage that could only have been made by a slug slamming into him and not going all the way. I've seen those before. Somebody took a shot at him all right. We found the smashed slug on the floor a few feet away. A forty-five."

Lucy Hamilton sniffed. "This Evie woman. What about her?"

"Checked her out too. A singer who's worked clubs all around the country. In the early-thirty age bracket, I'd say. She was glad to grab Maltby's offer of a job in the *Speak Easy*. And she has no known gangland connections."

His grin widened. "Why do you always suspect the women, angel?"

"Cherchez la femme, Michael," she said, and grinned back at the redhead. "What about Maltby? Did he have any ideas about who was trying to kill him?"

"Now you sound like Gentry. Will pounded that question at him in his private office for a solid hour. All he got was that Maltby has been receiving strange telephone calls advising him to sell his share of the club and leave town. Only that and nothing more. Maltby says the voice was deep and rough, like a movie gangster's, but very, very tough."

Lucy Hamilton's face widened in surprise. "Well, then. What's the problem? Obviously, his partners are the ones who want him to take off, so they can have all the profits themselves."

Shayne shook his head. "Not as simple as that, Lucy girl. Mr. Maltby owns all the percentage of the *Speak Easy*. According to what

he told Will Gentry he has no silent partners. The place belongs to him lock, stock and Prohibition piano. That angle is out, angel."

"Gee whiz," Lucy sighed. "You sure make it tough, Michael. Then who could want to kill Marvin Maltby?"

"I'll make a deal with you, angel," Shayne said, and smiled. "When I find out, I'll let you know."

The phone rang. Lucy scooped it up efficiently. The caller turned out to be Timothy Rourke of the *Miami Daily News*. Shayne went into his own office to take the call.

"What's on your mind, Tim?"

"I wanted to ask you that, Mike. I understand from the little lads around here that you were on hand at that shooting in the *Speak Easy?*"

"Yes, I was, Tim. But you have all the facts."

"Gentry working on any leads?"

"Not that I know of."

"Come on, Mike. If I know you, you must have some ideas."

Shayne laughed. "Nothing fit to print. Don't muck things up, Tim. A jealous guy took a shot at the new owner because he's going to make a lot of money some day. Nobody got hurt, so it will rest like that until Gentry tracks the guy down. Sorry to disappoint you, but I can't hurry it along."

Timothy Rourke chuckled. "Then there is no truth to the rumor that you were hired by Marvin Maltby to protect him from person or persons unknown?"

Michael Shayne grew instantly alert. He knew Timothy Rourke. He didn't make up things.

"Where did you get that rumor, Tim?"

"Got a phone call a little while ago. Sounded like a hood. Said he overheard Maltby hiring you after the shooting."

"Then he hung up without giving you his name, right?"

"Right. You know how these anonymous phone callers work, Mike."

"Thanks for the information, Tim. But the rumor is not true. You've got my word for it."

"That writes it off as news then, Mike—even as a rumor. Just thought you'd like to know."

Rourke hung up and Shayne pondered at his desk for a few minutes. The redhead asked Lucy to dial Miami Police Headquarters. Will Gentry was in.

"If you're calling about the gun, Mike, it still hasn't turned up. The boys are still fine-combing that place. If it's there, they'll find it."

"Are you closing the club at all?"

"What for? It opens tonight at six o'clock, as it always does. All I can do is plant some men on the premises to protect Maltby's life. Besides, we have to flush whoever took the shot at him. Can't see it any other way."

"Do you mind if I mosey down

to the club now and look things over? I have a few notions I'd like to kick around before I let you in on them."

Gentry's tone got wary. "Sure. You'll find Higgins on the front door and two men in the place. I'll call ahead and tell them to give you a free hand."

"Thanks, Will."

Mike Shayne put on his hat, blew Lucy Hamilton a farewell kiss and climbed into his car on Flagler Street. The *Speak Easy* was only about fifteen minutes easy riding from the office.

The redhead had a pretty good idea where the mysterious gun had gone. If it still was where the unknown would-be-killer had dropped it a few seconds after the shooting.

III

IT WAS TWO hours before opening time when Michael Shayne parked his car on the driveway outside the *Speak Easy*. The skies over Miami had greyed to where it almost looked like rain, which would have been more commonplace than the mystery of the gun. When the redhead approached the front door, a slot in the panel slid open and the face of Gentry's man, Higgins, peered out quickly.

"Will sent me," Shayne chuckled in the speakeasy tradition.

Higgins looked sheepish and swung the door open. In the interior of the club, the redhead found two other men drinking coffee out of cardboard containers. They shrugged at Shayne, mutely testifying to the fruitlessness of their search. They let the redhead alone as he wandered over the premises looking for likely places.

When the redhead paused at the dais and placed his hand on the old-fashioned upright piano, one of the men snorted deprecatingly.

"First place we looked, Shayne. But it's as empty as a breadbox after the rats got into it. *That* simple things seldom are."

Shayne nodded. "Yes, but that doesn't mean the gun wasn't there to begin with, does it?"

The man made a face. "Give me that again?"

"Just thinking out loud. Which way is Maltby's office?"

"Back there past that last row of tables. The door. He's in now you know. Came down to go over some books, he said."

Shayne thanked him and moved off. In the dimness of the interior, he found a square paneled door

with a small brass plate on it that said MANAGER. He knocked.

A muffled voice behind the door, said, "It's open."

Marvin Maltby was surprised to see him. Although he arose stiffly from his chair behind a wide, mahogany desk, his face was pleased.

"Shayne! You've reconsidered my offer—"

"Not exactly, Maltby. But maybe I can help you."

"That's good news, Shayne. I was just balancing the books. A little homework to take my mind off last night."

"Of course." Shayne drew up a chair and lit a cigarette before sitting down. "You'll have a full house tonight," he said. "People are funny. In spite of the obvious danger, they'll come for miles to see somebody take another shot at you. What with the headlines this morning and word of mouth, you should do an overflow business for weeks."

The fat man mopped his face nervously. "That kind of patronage I don't need, thanks. I haven't relaxed a second since last night."

Shayne puffed on his cigarette. "You've got it whether you want it or not. You'll make money now out of this."

Marvin Maltby laughed hollowly. "Don't beat around the bush, Shayne. If you're suggesting I set up a fake shooting last night to increase my trade, you are crazy."

"Did you?"

"No."

"I believe you."

"Then—" Maltby's little eyes popped. "You are suggesting that somebody else might have."

"I am."

"But who would have anything to gain by it? The people who are trying to take the club away from me? But that's ridiculous. They'd be the first the police would go after."

"Let's forget that for the time being, Maltby." Shayne said, watching the night club owner closely. "Judging from the way you were bruised yesterday whoever fired that shot must have been standing pretty close to hit you. Probably within ten or fifteen feet. Yet you say you didn't see anything."

Maltby wagged his heavy head. "No, it's as I told you. You had left the table and gone into the bar with Evie. I looked down at my glass to see if I needed a refill. I

reached for the champagne bottle, and that's as far as I got.

"It felt like the whole room had caved in on me. I blacked out and didn't come to until you came into the room, and I saw you bending over me."

"You certainly made no mistake in wearing a bullet proof vest. It saved your life. Even if," Shayne added slowly; "it makes what you told me about threats on your life sound very fishy."

"The vest is merely window dressing for the Prohibition motif," Marvin Maltby said, reddening. "Are you suggesting that the police are suspicious of me, and that Gentry thinks I lied to you?"

"No. I'm only suggesting possibilities." Shayne got up and killed his cigarette in an ashtray on Maltby's desk. He sat down again.

"What about Evie Dane?" he asked.

Maltby looked confused. "A singer. A fine singer. She should be where the big ones are. On TV, in the movies or working in Vegas and New York. This is a big chance for her. I'm glad she's with me."

"She insisted I help you, Maltby. She likes you, and she pleaded your case so persuasively that I was coming back to talk to you when the shot came."

"Loyalty. That's what I like in a woman. I'm glad you told me that about her, Shayne. I'll see she doesn't regret it."

"Beautiful girl," Shayne mused. "Does she have to fight off admirers?"

Maltby found the change of subject refreshing. "I leave her alone but I suppose some of my customers try to date her. She'd hardly be a night club asset if they didn't. But I'd say she was doing a single all the way. And I've never seen her with one particular man to the exclusion of others."

Shayne rose to his feet. "You are opening tonight, of course."

"Of course."

"I'll be back later. Gentry will have you well covered. In the meantime, they still haven't found the gun that marked-up your chest."

"That's something I can't understand, Shayne. Everyone was searched on the spot. If it had been thrown away, it should have been found in the club."

Shayne nodded in silent agreement. "Do you have a floor plan of the club, Maltby?" he asked. "Showing the arrangement of tables and disposition of help?"

"Why, yes. Right here." Maltby rummaged in a drawer, produced a square organization chart and handed it to Shayne. "About that gun—" He fumed helplessly. "It should be in the club, shouldn't it, Shayne?"

"Yes," Michael Shayne said. "But as I told the boys Gentry stationed outside, it didn't have to remain where it was ditched in the first place."

The redhead let Marvin Maltby think that one over as he exited from the office. He was also thinking about what Lucy Hamilton had said. *Cherchez la femme*. Find the woman.

Lucy was only half-right. Michael Shayne was looking for a man. The one who had fired the gun, hidden it in the piano, and removed it later, when the personal body search by the police of all the patrons in the club had ended.

And that could only be one particular type of man.

IV

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK, Evie Dane was sitting in her dressing room backstage at the *Speak Easy* when there was a knock on her door. She slipped hastily into a dressing gown, buckled it about her waist and called out, "Come in."

Michael Shayne stood quietly in the entrance.

"May I come in, Evie?"

"Mr. Shayne! Wait, let me take that junk off the chair—"

The redhead waited patiently as she fussed and fidgeted to make a spot for him. She blushed as she folded up her lingerie into a ball and flung it into a corner of the tiny dressing room.

Shayne sat down, watching her in the mirror with the row of bulbs bordering it on three sides. A smell of makeup essentials filled the place.

Evie spread her arms across the chair, her lovely face still smiling.

"Evie, I wanted to talk to you before things got out of hand. As it stands now, nobody's been hurt and there's no reason for things to get further messed up by panic or going off half-cocked."

Her smile vanished.

"I don't get you, Mr. Shayne."

The redhead nodded. "Yes, you do. You see, Evie, the whole thing is pretty clear to me and I want to stop you before you ruin yourself forever."

"Mike, if you're saying what I think you're saying—"

"Like when you're in trouble, huh?" Shayne reached into his pocket and took out a .45 Colt automatic. He did not point it at Evie Dane but let it hang loosely in his fingers.

"What about this, Evie? You recognize it?"

She laughed nervously. "It's a gun. So?"

"It's a very particular gun. It happens to be the gun that was fired into Marvin Maltby's chest yesterday."

"It is?" Her eyes rolled. "Why, that's wonderful. If you turn it over to the police they'll be able to trace it to the man who shot Maltby—"

"Evie," Shayne said hopefully. "This won't work. I want you to own up. It was a great idea but it won't work."

She turned her back on him and reached for a powder puff. "You

aren't making sense, Mr. Shayne. So you'd better march out of here. I go on in ten minutes."

"You talk like a fool," Shayne said harshly. "You told Marvin Maltby to hire me after having him badgered with a lot of phony phone calls from a male accomplice of yours here in the club. You arranged to have Maltby meet me here instead of at my office. You talked him into that too. Then you conveniently walked me into the bar out of sight while your accomplice fired a shot at Maltby knowing full well he was wearing a bullet-proof vest. You knew that too.

"You know everything about Maltby, including the fact that he owns the club one hundred percent. So whatever you could do to advance yourself down here, you only had to deal with him to make everything work out in your favor."

She sneered in the mirror. "You're crazy. What motive could I possibly have for resorting to such a fool stunt?"

Shayne looked at the gun. "The personal angle. You've got a fine voice, but not the career to match it. You wanted publicity, a showcase so that the agents and bookers would know you were alive. You didn't want to hurt anybody. You just wanted to toss the *Speak Easy* into the limelight. And you succeeded. A lot of people are going to be here for weeks, thanks to your grandstand play.

"You really tipped your mitt when your accomplice phoned Timothy Rourke to say I was working on the case. The only reason for such a call was more publicity. By letting everyone think I was working on the case it would look twice as bona fide. But Tim didn't fall for it."

Evie Dane threw back her head and laughed. The dressing gown slipped down her back revealing lovely shoulders.

"I've heard everything, Shayne. That's a press agent's pipe dream. You ought to send it to *Variety*."

"No," the redhead said. "I'm giving you a chance to wipe the slate clean. I got your boyfriend to own up. If you want, we'll all go see Will Gentry and find out just how much of a crime you've committed. I don't know what the rap is for something like this."

"Boyfriend?" She faltered. "I have no boyfriend."

"Of course you haven't," Shayne agreed. "But he didn't know that and since nobody was going to get killed, he helped you with your little scheme."

"He?" she fairly shrilled. "Who are you talking about?"

"Waiter number five," Shayne said evenly. "I estimated where the shot came from. From the angle across the tables, it had to be someone close and someone on his feet. The only one who worked that corner of the room was waiter number five. I got the layout from Maltby a few hours ago. And only a waiter standing up in that room wouldn't be noticed. Waiters sitting down are uncommon and noticeable."

Shayne nodded. "So it was easy. He had to be the one who fired the shot. The piano was the only feasible place to hide a gun until the cops finished their personal search. Then it would be normal for a waiter to move around the club and re-possess the weapon. Makes sense, doesn't it? Especially if you're in on the deal and it's your piano."

Her face had lost some color. "Why are you telling me all this—if he talked like you say and you've got the goods on me?"

The redhead was patient.

"It's like I told you. You haven't hurt anybody yet. If you come clean with Gentry, you'll square yourself even more and may be get off with a fairly light sentence when the case comes up before a judge. And I don't want you making any fool plays to get away. You'll get hurt. So come on. Let's tell Maltby and then go see Gentry. That's the sensible thing to do, isn't it?"

"If you say so, Mike."

Michael Shayne stood up. He dropped the .45 in his pocket. He stood up and waited. Evie Dane moved dumbly from her chair and stared at him.

"I'll have to dress."

"I'll have to watch," Shayne said. "Sorry."

She nodded almost indifferently and took off the dressing gown. Her white flesh glowed freshly against the bold undergarments of black bra and panties. The redhead leaned against the door, marveling how some one so lovely and feminine could harbor in her mind such way-out dreams of conquest.

He was completely prepared for her to try something unstable and hysterically feminine. She did. She came rushing at him, weeping desperately, flailing with her long fingernails.

Sighing, Michael Shayne sidestepped her and poked the .45 into her ribs gently. She stopped as if she had run into a wall. "Stand back," the redhead sighed again. "You're not going anywhere."

Evie Dane cried.

When the call boy pounded excitedly on the dressing room door because Miss Dane was late for her cue, Shayne let him in and

told him to call Will Gentry on the house phone.

The nonsense at the *Speak Easy* was over.

V

LUCY HAMILTON and Michael Shayne were having a quiet conversation when Will Gentry walked into the Flagler Street office. He scowled when he saw Shayne and grunted hello at Lucy.

"Just got a bulletin from Tallahassee. That APB on the waiter worked. They picked him up two hours ago. The gun was in the glove compartment of his car. He broke down, and what he told us tallied with everything you were lucky enough to get from her by letting her think you were holding four aces."

Gentry grimaced. "Someday your luck is going to run out, Mike."

Shayne laughed. "Why get upset, Will? It was a hunch and it paid off."

Gentry sighed. "But how could you be sure she'd fall for your story about making the waiter crack and showing her your own gun?"

The redhead shrugged. "When I went looking for that waiter, I found him in. His name was Curt Daniels. When I checked with Tim Rourke, I learned that Evie Dane had been married once to a man named Daniels. I hinted plenty to the guy and made him as nervous as hell. By the time I left him, I knew he was either ready to run or get in touch with Evie. So I bluffed when I saw her. After all, she wasn't really a murderess. Just a schemer with big ideas. The gun bit was purely psychological."

NEXT MONTH **THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE THRILLER**

THE FRIGHTENED TARGET

by BRETT HALLIDAY

She was a gangster's moll type blonde,
—a real Roaring Twenties throwback.
So Mike had to hurdle the years between!

"Some bluff," Gentry growled. "How could you be sure the gun was a forty-five automatic instead of a pistol or that Evie Dane hadn't seen it herself?"

"I was guessing there," Shayne admitted. "But not too much either. It had to be a heavy slug to make that bruise through Marvin Maltby's vest and I don't think Evie more than glanced at it, once I showed it to her. She was too busy figuring she was caught and trying to climb out from under."

Will Gentry sighed and Lucy Hamilton grinned.

"I told you he was quite a guy," Lucy said.

Before Gentry could frame a suitable reply, the phone on Lucy's desk whirred. Shayne waved her off and picked up the phone. He listened for a few seconds, mumbled an affirmative and recradled the receiver.

"Well," Gentry asked, "is that another client requesting your time and effort, Mike?"

Michael Shayne shook his head and looked at Lucy Hamilton. He winked at Will Gentry. "No, Will. Just a call from Marvin Maltby's secretary. It seems he's booked a ringside table for us, on the house, at the *Speak Easy* in honor of our straightening out his trouble."

"Oh," Lucy Hamilton enthused, "that's wonderful, Michael. I just bought a new dress I've been saving for something like this."

"Fine, angel. Wear it. You're invited too, Will." Mike Shayne smiled. "You won't need a bullet proof vest this time."

Will Gentry laughed. "With you around, Mr. Shayne, how can we be sure?"

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

A lot of things can surprise you in a "way out" bar, including a cat's odd dislike of redheads.

lobster for a crazy cat

by . . .

Thomas Calvert McClary

IT WAS EXACTLY eleven-thirty a.m. when little Charley Medina turned into the bar. At the back end, Benny the Book said to Bozo, "Your only legitimate customer."

Bozo, the barkeep, watched Charley, who was dressed in working clothes with twenty dollars worth of iron hardware under his arm. Bozo said suggestively, "I

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wish the hustlers and racketeers spent as much money as fast."

Charley stopped within the inner swinging doors and squinted into the dim recesses of the big room. The place looked dingy, as it was meant to look—high, dark panels, dull wallpaper above, indirect lights that were but a glow. In bootleg times it had been the biggest liquor drop on Avenue A, and its clientel had not changed greatly in the interim.

Charley called, "Where's that crazy cat?"

"He hasn't been around all morning," Bozo said. "And I wish to hell he'd never come back. He chased a customer out of here yesterday."

Charley grinned. "It must have been a redhead."

"Cats can't see color," Benny grunted. "You ought to know that!"

"That's one cat who's crazy. Maybe he smells it," Charley said. "But you never saw him go for anybody but a redhead."

"He ain't going to get the chance to go for me," Pogo the Pipe boomed. Pogo looked like a particular homely bear balanced atop his stool. He was a leftover from Murder Inc. He could smash an oak barrel in his arms, but on business, he preferred a piece of lead pipe ending in a joint. Pogo was scared to hell-and-gone of Crazy Cat.

Charley moved to the near end of the bar and clanked his package down. Bozo yipped, "What are you trying to do, wreck my bar?"

"If there weren't so much chewing gum under it, it wouldn't stand up now," Charley said imperturbably. "Gimme Chivas Regal." His wise eyes ran over the lower shelf of liquors—Teacher's, Ambassador, Tennessee, H&H Pinch, Johnny Walker, Old Grandad, Jamisons, Hennessey, Martel.

"Creeps, what a poverty ridden neighborhood!" he commented. "No future here."

Pogo suddenly jerked straight and rigid, his eyes popping and focused above Charley. *"Look out!"* he wheezed from way down in his throat.

Charley turtled his head between his shoulders. There was a blur of furry shadow in the air. Seven and a half pounds of the homeliest cat ever seen came flying down off the top of the door box. It landed with all four feet gathered on Charley's head, almost knocking his face into the bar. Then it jumped down in front of him and smelled his nose and purred.

"You damned crazy cat, you're going to kill somebody someday," Charley complained. "I brought you a lobster from Fulton Market."

Bozo poured the Chivas Regal. "You gone crazy too, buying that four footed bomb lobster?"

"I didn't buy it," Charley said.

He unwrapped his hardware and pulled a lobster out of the cen-

ter of it. It was still alive, but he left that problem to the cat. He threw it on the floor, and Crazy Cat thumped down like a ton of bricks to figure matters out.

"If you guys weren't such cheapskates," Charley said. "Gimme another Chivas Regal—you'd feed the cat fresh caviar and blue fish. That cat brings more business in here than all of you books and racketeers together."

"Brings it in?" Bozo howled. "Listen, that cat is bankrupting me! I'm going to get a machine gun and kill it!"

"You'd miss even with a bar," Charley said. "That cat's good luck for the house. Didn't he short the lights the night Detective Flynn came in for a pinch?"

"He should have electrocuted himself!" Bozo grumbled.

Charley looked down fondly at the cat. God, it was homely and awkward looking. But it could jump twelve feet and land on a half dollar.

The cat was stalking the lobster. The lobster was heading in Pogo's direction. Pogo was staring at both with horror, frozen to his seat, but cowering back little by little against the bar. He complained with a crack in his rusty voice, "It ain't right to let that animal chase that poor lobster when it's alive!"

Charley looked at him with mild surprise. Pogo was reputed to have smashed over a hundred men into a gory, sodden, Kingdom Come.

A slick chick wearing real diamonds and dressed by Bergdorf sauntered in and showed a length of nylon from her stool. Bozo said, "Hi, Kate," and started mixing her stinger without a word.

Kate dug in her pocketbook for a cigarette. For an instant, the ugly muzzle of a short thirty-eight appeared among the clutter, and she pushed it back down with distaste. She found a smoke and match and lighted up and swung around to look at the jungle scene upon the floor.

"Crazy cat!" she stated. "He'll break your foot in his claw!"

"Even money?" Benny suggested.

"All right, ten," Kate said, and laid it on the bar.

Charley shook his head. "Can't even let breakfast go by without making book! I want the winner should buy that cat some fresh caviar. Gimme a Chivas Regal. You want me to die of thirst?"

Frankie Yale came in and took the stool adjoining Kate's. He was very slight of build and quiet of manner, almost retiring. His suits cost two hundred and fifty dollars and his shirts thirty, but they were very subdued. He was always courteous, always a sucker for a handout, and never argued. That was his gun in Kate's pocketbook, and he was top Mafia east of Second Avenue.

He flipped his left index finger at Bozo, which meant soda on the

rocks, and turned to look at the gladiators below him. "How's that crazy cat going to kill a live lobster?" he asked.

Benny said, "You asking money?"

"No, I'm not asking money or I'd bet with Charley," Frankie said. "I just want facts."

Charley said, "He'll do it. He'd go to hell and back for a lobster. He ought to have one every morning. These cheapstakes don't feed him here."

Frankie glanced up at the girl. "Lucky that cat isn't a woman or you'd have some competition."

"You don't let me have lobster for breakfast," she pouted.

"No, you want too many diamonds for dinner."

Charley bounced his empty glass on the bar. "Can't a guy get a drink in this joint?" he demanded.

Four customers came in successively. Another book, a waterfront torpedo, and two hard-eyed, well-heeled customers of Benny's. Falco the Fence came in, with his oily smile and furtive pinched eyes, hands in both pockets to hang onto whatever he had.

Immediately after him came Sammy the Shylock, with eyes like a shark and the instincts of an octopus. Blonde Gertie came in jingling solid gold charms and spangles and very daintilly arranged her two hundred seventy pounds upon a barstool.

Gertie had a nine room apartment, one of the last—and some very attractive young girl friends. She was strictly the conservative type—no late night roughhouse at her place! She opened for business at six a.m. by which time the vegetable boys had finished at the markets, and she closed promptly at noon. She wouldn't have let Tony Anastasia in ten minutes later.

The air raid sirens wailed their twelve o'clock signal, and tough shouldered Jake Ryan, who ran one of the East Side docks, came in laughing, in company with Aloyius Feitlebaum, who owned a warehouse and a trucking company. Ryan had won his moniker outbargaining the Jews. Feitlebaum had won his outfighting the Irish. The two were now brothers-in-law.

The company was getting too thick to suit Crazy Cat. Having

stalked the lobster clear to Pogo's stool, thereby crowding him almost back through the bar, Crazy Cat pounced. The lobster snipped, but caught nothing but air. Crazy Cat caught the lobster by a back plate. Now very dainty upon its feet, the cat trotted over to Charley Medina, leaped upon his shoulder and thence to the dark top of the door setback.

Charley said with paternal pride, "Watch this, now, Frankie."

All talk stopped while Crazy Cat roamed the exact edge of the setback with the lobster wriggling in its clutch. There was a place directly in front of the door where the linoleum had been scuffed bare and the cement below was exposed. Crazy Cat hunched above this, held the lobster until its balance was favorable, and dropped it. It repeated this three times and the sea denizen was quiescent if not dead. Crazy Cat then ripped it open with one swipe.

Charley Medina beamed and said, "I'll have a Chivas Regal on Benny."

Kate eyed the cat with the look of having been double crossed by another woman.

The noon crowd was coming in. Some runners, some neighborhood hoods, a couple of well manicured racketeers, some tough shouldered boys from the docks, trucking and warehouses. A couple of building superintendents, carpenters, plumbers, ironworkers and wreckers came in. The drinks were ordered fast and straight. There wasn't anything cheaper than sixty-five cents on the bar. This was on Avenue A, below Fourteenth Street, an area being cleared and considered the border of the actual slums. The land of the poor, underprivileged.

Business took place in monosyllables and by veiled reference. Money passed, some of it big money. Men laid five or twenty on the bar and left the change for Bozo. No neighborhood resident ever picks up their change on the East Side. It is also the only section of the United States where the customers include the owners in a round of drinks as an automatic gesture.

Occasionally, Crazy Cat scuffed a chunk of lobster shell out of his lair, usually managing to hit one of the customers in the cheek. Some of them complained and Bozo raced his drinks muttering darkly that he was going to kill that damn cat. Charley Medina leaned his elbows on the bar and grinned mockingly. Bozo couldn't even catch that cat.

The working stiffs had cleared out, leaving the crowd in there one of concentrated rackets, gangs, toughness, and worldly wisdom. There were at least four guns in the crowd, and not a customer who could not watch the window for sixty seconds and spot some neighborhood friend to signal. That was

when the stranger walked in, and menace came in with him.

He was tall, muscular, rough of bone. There was truculence in his walk. He wore a grey tweed suit, not too well fitted. It bulged slightly under each armpit. His shirt was just slightly soiled, wrinkled mostly, and his tie knot was not quite tight around the collar. He wore no hat, and that was what made his hair a little obvious. Every hair on his head was perfectly combed, perfectly in place, perfectly trimmed.

The cat looked over its parapet and hissed.

There was an empty stool immediately to the stranger's left, but he disregarded it. He took standing position at the curved corner of the bar, with little Charley Medina on his right and the wall beyond. The empty stool and then Kate and Frankie were immediately to his left.

He looked at no one. He looked in the mirror and stroked his perfect, wavy, coal black hair with a bony knuckled, rough nailed, calloused hand. The hand looked like it had seen the penitentiary rock pile. Its condition didn't match up with the meticulous tonsorial department. He ordered Pinch on the rocks, laid a dollar out with his left hand, and then leaned on his left forearm—but in balance, in the way of a man who was only resting his arm upon the bar and could strike out with it instantly.

He smelled of danger. The boys felt it and talk went quiet or changed to negligent subjects. Their gazes drifted across his reflection non-committally. What they saw was a strong boned, too-gaunt face, with a mouth that might have been well formed but that was taut with tension, and cold grey eyes sparkling like ice. Reckless eyes, violent eyes, eyes combing the mirror for some kind of trouble. Maybe he was jagged up, maybe not. But he was crazy.

The customers exchanged glances. To some, he had a familiar look, or maybe it was just the familiarity of the killer smell. But nobody knew him, and nobody could guess which one of them he was after. Kate reached a cigarette from her pocket book and turned it and left it open in her lap so Frankie could make a quick grab. Pogo beetled his brows and chewed at his cheek, wondering if he could reach Bozo's icepick and straighten back up in time.

Benny thought of a parlay with a tough drunk that he had welched on hoping the man would not remember, and grew a little grey around the gills. Falco the Fence looked like his eyes would pop from his head. He was searching madly for a spitoon or some place he could drop whatever was in his pockets. Sammy the Shylock had eleven thousand dollars on him, and he was being very alert, but very retiring.

Jake Ryan eased his stance and tested his joints. His face had toughened with fight, but he waited to see if this was his show. Aloysius Feitlebaum looked grim and peaked. Truckers were always on the spot. Little Charley Medina shoved his hardware over against the wall, letting the stuff inside the package open up a bit for easier grabbing.

The stranger pinned him with a blazing stare a moment and then said, "Iron." He made it a statement, not a question.

Charley said, "Yeah," and watched him from the corner of his eye. Without appearing to intend it, the stranger inched a little closer, so that a roundhouse with a length of that iron would not catch him with the tip.

Bozo was the brassiest with the most logical excuse. He leaned against the back bar and asked casually, "Moved in around the neighborhood?"

The stranger's lips peeled back over oversized ivories, showing the gums as well. It might have been a smile or a snarl. "No," he said flatly, and pinned Bozo with his bleak, sparkling grey eyes. "And I don't like questions. Just give me another drink and shut up."

That closed Bozo out unless he wanted to make something of it, and Bozo didn't. This guy had the feel, and look, of molten iron that a sluice of water might explode.

Falco the Fence was finally driven beyond caution. He stood with his hands still in his pockets, looking out the big front window as if watching for some contact, and then grunted as if he'd seen him.

"See you later," he said from the side of his mouth to Sammy, and started out.

At the corner of the bar, the stranger swung, almost slowly, and stepped over against the corner of the door box, so that he was out of reach of Charley and facing Falco. His lips pulled back over his heavy teeth and gums again. His eyes looked like spotlights on chunks of ice. His right thumb and index finger held his tie—just at the point where his hand could drop instantly to his armpit.

"You don't want to go nowhere," he informed Falco. "Nowhere at all. Not right now."

Falco froze, his predatory features torn between fear and avarice. The stranger threw back his head and put his cold gaze down his nose. "Or do you?" he added with gritty, mocking softness.

Falco went grey green. "I got a date," he gulped. Then he blurted hastily, "But it can wait."

"That's good. I wouldn't want you to miss the fun," the stranger said.

Falco squeezed his running nose and moved back toward Sammy. Sammy glared at him and moved away to the side.

The stranger signaled another

drink and grunted, "Leave the bottle." This time he didn't bother to put out money.

Little Charley said with realistic patience, "Chivas Regal," and tossed down the drink and turned with his back to the bar to look up at the cat.

The cat had either consumed or deserted its lobster to crouch on the combing of its lair and watch the stranger. It had its off-color, unmatched eyes rivetted on the back of his head. One of its chewed up ears was cocking back and forth. Occasionally, the tip of its tail showed as it twitched.

There was low voiced, keyed, sporadic talk at the bar. Not much. Everyone waited. Everyone watched for some indication of who this crazy goon was after. He gave no sign. He just went on drinking, and all they could tell was that he was winding up in a crescendo. Any time now he was going to blow. Then the bar would swing into action, but by then, it would be too late for somebody, and still, nobody could guess who.

The stranger poured another drink. He'd drunk half the bottle, but there wasn't a sign of it hitting him. He watched them all in the mirror with his cold, sparkling, savagely mocking eyes. He could feel the tension of the crowd just as they could feel him, only they were twelve to one, and that amused him.

Suddenly he straightened at the bar, his wrists crossed in front of him. His mouth twitched once, his nostrils pulled thin. Incredibly, his eyes went brighter, as if he had searchlights inside of them. Everybody at the bar jerked or stiffened. He was going to reach and they knew it and he knew they knew it, and he was alert to the first movement out of any of them.

Then he snorted and tossed his head forward twice, like a horse, and his hands started to move. At that moment there was an ungodly scream from above him. A furry shadow bolted through the air. The cat landed on the stranger's neck, and tore at his head with one great sweep. That beautiful black hair peeled off in one piece, showing a close cropped red head beneath.

The stranger staggered back, cursing, yelling, trying to reach the crazy cat that was clawing his neck on one side and trying to eat his ear on the other, its tail bristling.

Frankie's hand darted into his girl's bag for his gun. Little Charley grabbed a heavy piece of hardware. Pogo came off his stool like a bull elephant and started up the room. Bozo grabbed for his ice bat and Gertie suddenly had a stilletto out of her stocking. Sammy stood against the divider in the room, nerveless, with gun in hand. Jake Ryan's right hand doubled into a fist like a rock, and Aloysius dropped to all fours and

crabbed obliquely to get behind the stranger's legs.

But the crazy cat was there first, and the cat was doing all right by himself. He had half the stranger's ear hanging loose and shifted bites to the remaining half. He had one of the redhead's cheeks ripped wide open, right through to the mouth, and he has two sets of claws digging into the man's jugular.

The redhead wheeled, yelling, screaming hoarsely now, wrenching and twisting desperately to free himself without success. With a roar, he finally threw himself sidewise against the cornice of the swinging doors to clear his back. The crazy cat jumped nimbly in time, but the stranger lurched wildly right on through and legged it frantically down the street.

Everybody in the room had frozen where they were when the redhead went out the door. Now, four voices said at once, "Cripes, that was Crazy Red Carro! He didn't look the same in that wig. Fooled me completely."

"Might have something to do with eight years in Dannemora," Katy shivered. "He meant to massacre every man who wouldn't help him at his trial."

The cat crossed from the door proudly and landed on the bar like a ton of bricks. He flattened his ears and hissed at Charley, then rubbed his head under Charley's chin and purred with the tone of a cement mixer.

Charley said, "You're crazy, cat. You don't deserve nothing but the best. And I've got an idea you're going to eat a lot of lobster and fresh caviar."

"With heavy cream," Kate added.

Frankie tossed his gun back in her bag and laughed. He reached in his pocket to start the kitty. "How in hell did he know there was red hair under that wig?" he grunted.

"Ask him," Charley said. "He don't ever tell the truth, but ask him anyway." He whanged the bar with his flat hand. "What the hell's wrong with the Chivas Regal around here? Don't you serve liquor at this bar?"

Before he could reach for it, the cat jumped to the top of his head and just sat there cleaning its bloody whiskers.

We think you'll like Johnny July. He's not only a very hard-hitting private eye. He has his own methods and a colorful way of making you remember him, for he specializes in hard-to-crack cases and unusual people who have a disconcerting way of turning up stone cold dead.

A COMPLETE

JOHNNY JULY

SHORT NOVEL

THE SCREAM CAME just as I was undressing, shrill and full-throated, piercing in its intensity, cutting the quietness like a banshee wail. It rose and fell, throbbing, going on and on and on, while my fingers fumbled to refasten buttons only just undone. A long time after the pitiless cry was actually over, the echoes of it seemed to hang on the night air. It seemed to come from the far side of the main staircase.

I threw on my robe and made for the door. It was only when I got the door open that I remem-

THE BODY ON THE BED

by

FRANK

STRUAN

bered that my Luger pistol was still in my traveling bag. I went back for it. That made me a little late arriving at the scene of the tragedy, but at least it saved me the bother of inquiring the way. A lot of other people had come out on to the landing ahead of me, and were hurrying in alarm towards the main staircase. I shouldered my way through them, wondering why a man like Horace Trant should allow himself to be surrounded by such an ill-assorted

collection of useless hangers-on.

When I got to the main staircase I didn't have to ask myself where the scream had come from. I could see the group ahead of me outside the door of Trant's bedroom. It looked as if it was Judith who had screamed. She was the younger sister of Trant's second wife, Loretta. She stood now—if you could call it standing—with one of the maids supporting her and pressing a damp handkerchief to her brow.

She was trembling like someone just recovering from an epileptic fit. Her face was drained of all color, and her mouth was working convulsively.

"What happened?" I asked.

The maid looked at me with wide, excited eyes. She pointed a shaky finger at the door of Horace Trant's bedroom. "In there," she said. "But Mrs. Trant doesn't want anyone to go in."

The door wasn't ajar. A thin sliver of yellow light showed beneath its heavy oak paneling. I pushed it open, and went in.

Loretta Trant's husky voice arose in anger. "I gave orders that no one—"

"The maid told me," I said, cutting her short. I pushed the door shut and leaned back against it. I didn't look at her. Any other time I would have, for Loretta was worth looking at. But there are some things before which even a beautiful woman must take a back seat. Violent death is one of them.

Horace Trant was obviously dead. And he had died in a quite horrible way.

There was blood on the pillows, blood on the sheets, blood on his expensive hand-tailored pajamas. Someone had made an elaborately gruesome job of slitting Trant's throat. Not a neat job, but decidedly final.

It wasn't a pretty picture and I could understand now why young Judith had been on the verge of collapse. I felt a little sick myself. I fumbled in the pocket of my robe for a cigarette.

It was then that I noticed Ralph Condon.

He was standing like a great black spider in the cobweb of shadows where the light of the bed-lamp didn't quite penetrate. He came out of his cobweb into the light—a big, florid man, close to fifty, a little grey at the temples, a little fat round the waistline. But still with the kind of look that would appeal to a great many women. They appealed to Loretta, if Bay City gossip could be believed.

He stroked his pencil-thin mustache with the back of his forefinger.

"You heard what the lady said. She wants to be alone."

I put a cigarette between my lips without lighting it. "Sure, I heard."

The next instant the cigarette

was smacked from my mouth and Condon's heel was grinding it to fragments on the floor.

"Get out," he said, thickly. "Do you hear me. Make yourself scarce."

I said, "The hell with that, Condon. I'm not one of your stooges. I don't take orders from you."

His face darkened. One hand clenched and unclenched itself at his side. "Why you cheap—"

Loretta Trant cut in on him. "Let me handle this, Ralph."

Her voice had a husky, deep-throated quality that seemed to edge right up on you. It was quite a voice, and Loretta Trant was quite a woman. She could have been almost any age between twenty-five and a very sophisticated forty. With a woman like her, age didn't matter. There was a smooth, sleek animal quality about her; a restless sensuality. She was tall and willowy, with blue-black hair, yellow-flecked eyes and very full lips. She wore a lilac satin housecoat and matching high-heeled mules.

As she moved towards me the housecoat moulded itself to her slim, willowy figure. She said, "I don't quite know where you come into this, Mr. July."

I found myself another cigarette, and lighted it this time without any interference from Condon. I let smoke trickle out of my nostrils, staring steadily at her through the smoke. "It's very simple, Mrs. Trant. Your husband hired me."

I reached under my robe for the wallet in my hip pocket, handed her one of my cards.

I didn't have to check on the name—JOHNNY JULY—*Private Investigator*. From the impatient glance she gave the card I wouldn't have minded betting that it displeased her. She tapped the edge almost angrily on a pink-tinted nail.

"But why should my husband need a private investigator?" she asked.

I gestured with my cigarette towards the mess on the bed. "Doesn't that answer you, Mrs. Trant?"

It was entirely a bluff on my part. I didn't know any more than she did why Horace Trant had hired me. He had come to my office in a big, cream-colored, chauffeur-driven Cadillac—a tall, bent man, prematurely aged through years of tangling with bulls and bears in the jungle of high finance. He had slipped me a two hundred buck retainer and invited me to join the weekend house party at his place in Riverside.

I could still remember how his thin, blue-veined hand had trembled when he'd gripped the edge of my desk.

"You'll just pass yourself off as a personal friend of long standing," he said. "I don't want anyone to know you're a detective. I want

you to take a look at a few of my other friends and relatives and tell me what you think of them."

"But why?"

"I'll tell you that, Johnny July, when you tell me what you think of them. I want you to get some unprejudiced impressions for yourself before you hear my story. Then you can tell me whether I've been an old fool or not.

It had sounded screwy, but two hundred bucks was two hundred bucks. So here I was in Riverside in a house which turned out to be no bigger than the State Capitol, and Horace Trant was never going to hear me tell him whether he'd been an old fool or not.

I left off leaning against the door, and as I did so the hubbub of voices reached us from outside. I wondered about that until I saw that the lock of the door was stripped clean out of the woodwork. Only my weight had been keeping the door shut.

Loretta Trant passed a hand wearily across her forehead. "Do me a favor, Ralph," she said. "Get that crowd out there to go back to their rooms."

Ralph Condon looked at me with dark, threatening eyes. "What about the Shamus?"

"He can stay. I want to talk to him."

"But—"

"I said I want to talk to him."

Her voice had a commanding quality.

Condon shrugged. "I hope you know what you're doing," he said. He moved towards the door and I saw then that except for a jacket he was still fully clothed under the dressing gown. "What do I tell them?"

"Tell them anything you like. There's been an accident—or I've been taken ill. Anything plausible to keep them quiet."

He shrugged again, looked at me doubtfully for a moment and

then went out. I pushed the door shut after him and moved a chair against it. Then I walked over to take a close look at the gruesome sight on the bed.

Horace Trant had died as he had lived—surrounded by the things that only enormous wealth can justify. Expensive paintings, ornate furnishings, oak-paneled walls, carpets so thick you could have run a lawn-mower over them. Money, they say, can buy anything.

I looked at Loretta Trant. I wondered if old man Trant had bought her the way he had bought everything else. It's a justifiable thought when you find April hitched to September, particularly to a September who could distribute century notes around April like autumn leaves.

It was an enormous single bed. I looked round the room. There was no communicating door.

"You didn't sleep with him," I said.

She shook her head. "No, I—" She broke off. "None of your damn business," Mrs. Trant said hotly.

Trant lay to one side of the bed, his head rolled over sideways on the pillow. There was a low cabinet beside the bed, containing only a silver tray and a green porcelain mug. I brought out a handkerchief and picked the mug up. Even through the handkerchief its warmth was still apparent. It smelled strongly of whisky. I looked at Loretta Trant.

"He had a whisky toddy every night," she said, "To help him sleep."

I put the mug down again. One of Trant's thin, blue-veined hands hung over the side of the bed beside the cabinet. Below it the oyster-colored carpet was flecked with dark spots of blood. In the middle of the specks, shining in the glare of the bedside lamp, was an old-fashioned, open-blade razor. I knelt to look at it more closely, but was careful not to touch it.

The Bay City cops don't like private eyes at the best of times. Particularly they don't like private eyes who go around touching evidence. When I straightened up Loretta Trant was standing beside me.

"It's his," she said.

I looked at her. "Very few men use cut-throat razors today."

"He was old-fashioned in many ways."

"But not in his choice of a wife," I said.

"I was his second wife."

I knew that. I'd done a bit of checking on Horace Trant after he'd called at my office.

There was a clatter as the chair I had propped against the door fell over. It was Ralph Condon. He said, "I've got rid of them. Judith's been packed off to her room and I've sent for a doctor."

I said, "Did you send for the police at the same time?"

Condon and Mrs. Trant looked at each other. Their eyes exchanged a wordless message. Then she said, "There's no possible way—"

Condon shook his head.

"You can't hope to cover up a suicide where violence of this sort has occurred."

She closed her eyes and put her hands to her face. "Police, inquest, reporters, publicity—how he'd have hated all that."

Condon slipped an arm about her shoulders, with a familiarity which was not lost on me.

"It isn't Horace you've got to worry about now, Loretta," he said. "It's yourself."

She raised her head. Her yellow-flecked eyes were hot and dry—tired, but with no hint of tears. She said, cynically, "Do you think I don't know that?" She looked at the body on the bed, and I could have sworn there was hate in her eyes. "An old man takes the easy way out and the living are left to suffer."

I said, "How do you know he took the easy way out?"

Condon's arm left her shoulders and gestured around the room. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it? You can see for youself. It's his own razor. Who else would want to kill an old man with no enemies?"

I looked from Condon to Mrs. Trant and back again. "I don't know much about the whys and wherefores yet", I said. "But there are certain interesting possibilities."

Condon was on me in two long strides, towering over me, his dark eyes menacing. "Exactly what do you mean by that statement?" he demanded.

I shrugged. "Nothing—except that a man with his kind of wealth usually makes himself a lot of enemies while he's amassing it."

He let himself relax a little. "All right," he said. "Maybe he does and maybe he doesn't." He turned, pointing at the splintered lock of the door. "See that? They had to almost break down the door to get in at him."

"What about the window?" I asked, nodding toward the French window on the opposite side of the room. It opened on a stone balcony.

Condon said, "Fastened on the inside. So was the door. It was suicide all right, July. Don't you go thinking anything else."

He moved away from me. "Do you want me to call the police, Loretta?" he asked.

Mrs. Trant nodded, white-faced. "We might as well get it over with," she said, her voice bitter.

Condon went towards the door. As his hand closed round the edge of the woodwork, I said, "You can still ask for the Homicide Bureau, Condon, and tell them

they've a case of murder on their hands."

II

CAPTAIN OF DETECTIVES Swenson was a big, beefy, beetle-browed man in his middle forties. We'd met once or twice before. He didn't like me, and the feeling was mutual.

He sat now behind the leather-topped desk in what had been Horace Trant's study, a cold cigar in his mouth, his thick fingers tinkering with a staghorn paper-knife. The desk wasn't quite as big as Grant's tomb, so there was plenty of space in the room for a shorthand writer and the little wizened man wearing a pair of old-fashioned prince-nez whom I recognized as a leg man for the District Attorney.

It was just after three in the morning when they got around to seeing me. Swenson looked tired. He was certainly irritable. He pointed the staghorn paper-knife at me and said, "They tell me you think this is a homicide case, July."

Someone, it seemed, had got in ahead of me with the good news. I gave myself two guesses as to who that someone might be.

I said, "That's my opinion, yes. You don't have to agree with it."

Swenson snorted. "You private dicks are all alike. Always trying to blow up little trial balloons until they explode all over the place. I suppose you think there's more chance of a flaw developing in a big balloon. Well—it's a dumb assumption."

He flicked the paper-knife at the shorthand writer. "Read him what Miss Judith Beredine has to say." He looked at me again. "Miss Beredine is Mrs. Trant's younger sister."

"Sure," I said. "I know. She found the body."

Swenson glowered. "Well, go on, Porter. Read it out."

The shorthand writer riffled the pages, cleared his throat, and read: "Statement made by Miss Judith Beredine, aged twenty-two, sister-in-law of the deceased. 'I wanted to see my brother-in-law privately because of some money trouble I was in. I thought he might help me out. I knew my sister took him some hot whisky in bed every night. I waited in my room until I heard her come out. Then I crossed the landing and tapped on his door. There was no reply. I knew he couldn't be asleep because my sister had only just come out. I knocked again, louder. I heard—or thought I heard—a strange gurgling sound. This frightened me. I ran to the next room and roused Tony Degas, a friend of mine.' "

"Tony Degas, the trumpet-player?" I asked.

Swenson nodded impatiently. "That's right. Go on, Porter."

The shorthand writer contin-

ued: " 'He helped me to break the door down. The room was in darkness except for the lamp by the bed. I crossed to the bed and saw that my brother-in-law was covered in blood and appeared to be dead—' "

"That'll do," said Swenson. He pointed the staghorn paper-knife at me again. "Well?"

I tossed it right back at him. "Well?"

He got up and came round the desk. "How come it's homicide?" he demanded. "The guy was alive when his wife left. *Someone* had to lock the door after her."

"Maybe it's self-locking," I said.

"Don't give me that. Someone had to turn a key inside. A minute later, when they break in, he's lying there with his throat cut."

"Maybe it was longer than a minute."

He swung away from me impatiently. "Okay. So it was longer than a minute. So what? He was still in there alone. The door locked—the window locked." He shook his head. "No, he did it himself, July."

I took time out to light a cigarette, flicking the match into the big black-and-chrome ashtray on the desk. "There's just one thing you've overlooked."

Swenson swung back with an angry grunt. "Such as?" he demanded, glowering down at me.

"Such as the fact that Trant was left-handed."

He blew down his nostrils. "We know he was left-handed."

I said, "A left-handed guy wouldn't switch over to his right just to cut his throat."

"Who says he did?" Swenson bent, caught me by the lapels, heaved me out of the chair. "Listen, July, I know your kind. Trant was going to hire you—"

I wrenched myself free of him. "He did hire me," I said.

"Okay. So he did hire you. Only now he's dead. And you think that if you can get the police investigating a homicide you can somehow cut yourself in on it." He thrust his beefy face close to mine. "Just you listen to me, July. This is obviously a suicide set-up, and we like it that way."

Pince-nez said, "Just a minute, Swenson. If this man's got anything to say, we might as well hear it. Okay, July—why are you so keen on making a homicide out of this?"

I said, "I don't have to make anything out of it. The facts do that for me."

"What facts?"

"Facts like the razor being near his right hand when he was left-handed."

Swenson said behind me, "You're nuts."

"So I'm nuts. So was the guy who cut Trant's throat. He knew Trant was left-handed, but he forgot that when you're facing a guy your left is his right."

Pince-nez said, "Where was the razor, Swenson?"

"By his hand."

"I know that. Left hand or right hand?"

You could see Swenson trying to sweat that one out. He turned round a couple of times as though that would bring him facing himself. Then he said, "Left."

"Sure?" asked Pince-nez.

"Sure I'm sure."

I said, "It wasn't, you know. It was his right."

Pince-nez said, "Okay. Let's go take a look-see."

He came to his feet. I followed them out; across the big black-and-white tiled hall; up the huge main staircase; along the landing. There was a cop on duty outside the busted door of Horace Trant's room. He stood aside for us to go in.

Inside the room a couple of men from the Homicide Department were taking a set of flashlight photographs. Dr. Jorgan, the police surgeon, stood there stroking his little billy-goat beard.

"Don't know why you sent for me," he grumbled as we filed in. "Even a dumb-headed cop can tell what the guy died from."

I said, "See that hand hanging out of bed. Well, that's his right. Our left—his right. The razor—" I broke off, pointing.

The dark splotches of blood still showed on the oyster-colored carpet. But there was no razor.

The razor lay now on the blue satin-quilted eiderdown, a couple of inches from Trant's left hand.

"Someone moved it," I said.

I looked round at them. Obviously they didn't believe me. The man from the D.A.'s office had a quiet, cynical smile on his sallow face.

Swenson let out a bellow of ribald laughter. "Well, what do you know?" he said. "So someone's moved it. You tell that to the Marines, July. And meanwhile, be an obliging if dim-witted shamus and get to hell out of here."

I started to protest.

"Out, chum."

As the door closed behind me I turned and found myself face to face with Ralph Condon. He grinned.

"Looks like the cops weren't very receptive to that homicide theory of yours, July."

I shrugged and went back along the landing. Whatever the cops thought, I still believed it was murder, and that meant that I had a tough job in front of me. It had been quite a house-party Horace Trant had thrown over the weekend.

There were a lot of guests, a lot of suspects and a lot of possibilities. I wondered who in particular, among his friends and relatives, Trant had wanted me to form an opinion about. Who, indeed, *were* his friends? There were certainly many among that motley collec-

tion of house guests who were not his type at all.

Maybe some of them were Loretta's friends. Maybe he would have pointed the sheep and the goats out to me over the weekend. Maybe that was why he had been killed—to stop him from pointing out the sheep and the goats, in drawing a sharp line between them.

That was the trouble with this case—too many 'ifs' and 'maybes' and not enough facts. The only real fact I had was that the razor had been near Trant's right hand, and the cops, for reasons which were understandable, were stubbornly determined not to believe that.

An idea came to me. I turned and went back along the landing, past the door of Horace Trant's room. Judith Beredine, in her statement, had mentioned crossing the landing directly to Trant's room. That told me the precise location of her room. I tapped on the door. There was a scuffling sound inside as though someone were getting into bed.

I tapped again. A voice said, "Come in."

I went in.

Judith was sitting up in bed with the blankets pushed far back. She slid down in the bed the instant she saw me, and gathered the blankets up around her, completely covering her bare neck and shoulders.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't know it was a man."

She had wide medium-blue eyes and tremulous lips. Her hair was cut in a pageboy bob. There was color in her cheeks and she seemed to have done very well in getting over the shock of finding Trant's dead body.

"You said to come in," I pointed out.

She nodded. "I thought it was the doctor back again."

"Isn't the doctor a man?"

"Well, yes—but you never think of doctors in quite that way, do you?"

She smiled a little as she said it, and I said I wouldn't know.

The room was neat and trim and very feminine. There were fancy frilled drapes around the bed, around the dressing table and around a corner alcove. The french window on to the balcony was an inch or so open and the wind teased the drapes. Her eyes went from me to the drapes, from the drapes to the french window.

"You want me to shut it?" I asked. "It's kind of chilly in here."

She shook her head. "Oh, no," she said, quickly. Too quickly.

I seated myself on the edge of the bed. "The name's Johnny July," I said. "I'm a private detective. Your brother-in-law hired me."

She seemed more puzzled than startled. "He did? Why on earth

would Horace do a thing like that?"

"We can talk about that later," I said. "Right now I need your help in obtaining proof that he was murdered."

"Murdered!" She repeated the word incredulously. Her eyes flickered away from me towards the open french window. Then she said, "But he wasn't murdered. He couldn't have been."

"Why not?"

"Why—She broke off, gesturing with her hands. "The door of his room was locked."

"The french window?" I said. "How about that? was it locked, too?"

She nodded her head, emphatically.

Did I imagine it or was there a moment's hesitation before the emphatic nod was translated into words?

"It doesn't lock," she said. "It bolts. The bolts were rammed home."

I said, quickly, "What made you check them?"

Again her hands made a fluttering gesture. "I'm not sure. I guess perhaps I thought the same thing you did. He hadn't killed himself." She leaned forward a little, said eagerly, as though trying to convince herself, "but it had to be suicide. It had to be. With the door and window locked."

"What if there was someone else in the room," I said.

She gave a little gasp and stared at me as if she wanted to take back the words.

"So there was someone in the room," I said.

She shook her head, swaying the pageboy bob intriguingly.

"You looked?" I asked.

"There wasn't anywhere to look."

I pointed to the curtained-off corner alcove. "How about that?"

She said, quickly again, "Horace didn't have one of those in his room."

"That's right, he didn't. But you saw something all the same, didn't you?"

She shook her head frantically. "No, I didn't. Not a thing. You've got no business to question me like

this. I told the police all I knew. Are you going, or do you want me to make a scene?" Her hand moved towards the wall buzzer beside the bed.

"I'm going," I said.

I went out, closed the door, counted three, and opened it again, very quickly. A man was just emerging from behind the curtains screening the corner alcove. He was a young man with dark brown hair and the drooping lower lip of a trumpet player.

"Hi there, Mr. Degas," I said.

He didn't say anything, just stared in startled resentment. Judith Beredine glared at me, with suddenly flaming cheeks. "You get out of here," she said.

I let the door close behind me a second time.

I went back along the landing to my own room. It was in darkness and my hand was already on the switch when I remembered I had left the light on. Too late! There was a swishing sound in the darkness, and something thudded against the side of my skull. Colored lights danced ahead of me. They wavered for an instant and then gave way to a long, dark tunnel. I dived in.

III

THE TUNNEL SLOPED upwards at a steep angle. I crawled on hands and knees towards the pinpoint of light at the far end. The pinpoint became a porthole. I got my fingers over the rim, hauled myself up, and discovered to my amazement that I was trying to crawl up the side of the wardrobe.

Daylight was filtering through the windows. My head throbbed tumultuously and my mouth was swollen and parched. I let the wardrobe support my weight while I felt the back of my head. There was a lump behind my ear the size of a pigeon's egg.

Legs that didn't altogether belong to me carried me over to the wash-basin. I splashed water on my face until I began to feel human again. The room looked as though someone had given it a pretty thorough going-over. The contents of my suitcase were strewn around the floor. Presently I felt well enough to start tidying things up a bit. There was plenty of that to do.

I was in the middle of it when a tap came at the door. It was Loretta Trant. She still wore the lilac satin housecoat and the high-heeled mules. There were dark circles under her eyes, as though she hadn't slept much.

"What's been going on here?" she asked in a startled voice, her eyes sweeping the room.

"Don't you know?" My own voice was distinctly cynical.

"Should I?"

I shrugged. "Someone slugged me and gave my things a going-over while I was unconscious."

"Why should anyone want to do a thing like that?"

I gave her a hard grin. "There are lots of interesting possibilities. Such as—curiosity as to why your husband hired me."

She said, "That's what I want to talk to you about. Why *did* he hire you?"

It was a tough question—and I didn't even know the answer myself. "I was sure you knew," I said. "I took it for granted."

"Well, you were mistaken. He didn't confide in me much." She moved towards the window, spoke over her shoulder. "Look, July, my husband hired you. I presume he paid you a retainer."

"Two hundred dollars."

"I see. You realize, of course, that now that he's dead you're out of a job. It must be a bitter disappointment to you."

I refused to concede the point. There had been something about old man Trant I had rather liked. He had hired me to take a long, careful look at his friends and relatives. Okay—so he was dead. So I could still take a peek at the friends and relatives. One of them had killed him. I was making it my job to find out which one. Don't ask me why. There wasn't any more dough in it for me—and there was likely to be a hell of a lot of trouble. But I was going to stay with it. I felt I owed that much to old man Trant.

"Okay," I said. "So he's dead and I'm out of a job. Was there something you wanted to add?"

As she turned I got a whiff of her perfume for the first time. It was very special.

Her voice was a husky whisper. "I'd double that retainer to know *why* he hired you," she said.

"So you think he was murdered, too."

I saw her stiffen. It was barely perceptible, that sudden tautness, but I was watching her closely.

"The police are satisfied that it was suicide."

"Naturally they're satisfied. Because someone moved things around to make them satisfied with the obvious. But I'm the opposite of satisfied. And I'm going to do something about it."

"And what, precisely, are you going to do?"

I didn't say anything in reply, because right at that moment I didn't have a plan worked out.

She said, "You can play this two ways. You can play it my way—and if you're wise you will. I'll make it five hundred dollars to know why you were hired. Then you bow out and leave things the way they are." Her lips tightened. "Or you can play it the hard way."

"Maybe I like playing things the hard way."

"Listen to me, July. Remain stubborn about this thing and you're almost certain to get hurt. I've got friends—"

"Ralph Condon," I suggested.

"That's right. Ralph Condon. He's a big man in this town. Too big for you."

"For a widow," I said, "you don't seem particularly concerned as to how your husband died."

"I'm not particularly concerned. I don't owe Horace anything. I married him without loving him. He knew that. I kept my side of the bargain while he was alive. Now that he's dead I don't want any scandal raked up."

"So you moved the razor."

"Nobody moved the razor," she said, without looking at me. "I say it was on the bed the whole time. Condon will back me up. The door was locked and so was the french window. Nobody could have got in or out between the time I left him and the time Judith found him dead."

"Maybe he was dead when you left."

It was a shot in the dark. For a moment—just a moment—there was something akin to fear in her eyes.

"You forget," she said. "Judith heard sounds inside the room when she knocked on the door."

I *had* forgotten that. I said, "You're lying about the razor and you know it. So is Condon. Judith could be lying about the noise she says she heard."

She glared at me. Her face had a strained look as though she was holding herself in check with an effort. "Think what you like about me. But leave Judith out of this."

"Okay," I said. "So Judith's left out. Someone still moved the razor. Someone could have bolted the french window the same way."

There was a sudden triumphant gleam in her eye. "Come and see for youself."

I followed her out, wondering what she had in mind. Trant's room still looked the same, except that the corpse was no longer there. His widow gestured towards the french window.

"See for yourself."

I crossed to the window and examined it closely. The french window was bolted, all right, and against each bolt, holding it in place, a screw had been driven into the woodwork.

"Why such excessive burglar protection?" I asked.

Loretta Trant shrugged. "He was like that. He had a sort of persecution complex. That was why he slept alone, and had the door fitted with a lock that fastened on the inside."

I turned all that slowly over in my mind. Certainly no one could have got in or out through the french window. The broken lock on the door was just as baffling. It had to be suicide—except for a little matter of a razor being in the wrong place.

"Satisfied?" asked a husky voice.

A hundred guys would have been. But something still stuck in

my gullet. Stuck there like a lump about the same size as the one on the back of my head. I said, "If everything is so easy to explain away, why was I slugged?"

"Maybe someone doesn't like you."

"So they toss my things around just for kicks. You don't really believe that."

She moved towards me in that hip-swinging way she had. "No, I don't believe that. I think Ralph Condon did it because he thought you might make things difficult for me."

"Maybe he moved the razor around for the same reason."

"If he did, he was wasting his time. Horace was alive *after* I left the room. Judith's statement proves he was alive."

"But Condon wouldn't know that."

"No, he wouldn't know. He may have thought I was guilty." A spasm of pain crossed her face. "By some standards, I had reason enough to kill my husband."

If it was an act it was a good one. I didn't think it was an act. I thought the mask of toughness was down and the real woman was visible for the first time. I felt curiously sorry for her without knowing why.

"Okay, Mrs. Trant. You win. I'll go along with the suicide verdict."

She relaxed visibly. "Then tell me why Horace hired you."

"I don't know," I said. "That's the simple truth. He never told me."

I told her how things stood. She nodded as she heard me out. "That was just like him," she acknowledged. "He had a persecution complex, as I've said. Hiring you was like locking his door and bolting that french window. An act of protecting himself when he didn't even know what he was protecting himself against. And in the end the one thing he couldn't protect himself against caught up with him."

She was fighting for control again. Suddenly she turned and went out of the room. I followed. She led the way across the landing to her own room, a room that went well with her unusual personality.

The walls were all mirror, the floor black-tiled. Her figure was reflected back and forth in the walls as she crossed the room and bent over a small, ivory-colored desk. She reached inside the desk, and returned to where I was standing with five hundred dollar bills in her outstretched hand. A dozen reflections accompanied her.

"What's this for?" I asked.

She smiled. "I said I'd pay five hundred dollars to find out why he hired you."

"But I couldn't tell you. I didn't know myself."

"I happen to believe you've still earned this sum."

I didn't want the money. Don't

ask me why. I had agreed to step out and go along with the suicide verdict. But I still didn't want to be under any financial obligation to her. I shook my head.

She said, still smiling, "You must make a great deal of money."

"I'd hardly say that. But I can't take this. I've done nothing to earn it."

She shrugged. "Very well. Have it your own way." She put the money back in the desk. "At least, you'll have a drink before you go." She moved towards the built-in bar. "What would you like?" she asked.

"What have you got?"

"Pretty well everything."

I was close behind her and, suddenly, I knew that she had pretty well everything it takes to make a guy remember how human he is.

"You can say that again," I said.

She didn't get it for a moment. When it finally dawned on her she smiled. A slightly disdainful, slightly tantalizing smile.

The next moment I had her in my arms. She didn't exactly resist, but I felt her stiffen as my arms went around her. Her lips were firm and unyielding . . . at first. Then, suddenly, the stiffness left her, and her lips became eager and warm and alive. Her arm went up and around my neck. She was, all at once, like a woman discovering passion for the first time. Or maybe that was just the impression I got.

IV

THERE, FOR ME, the affair of Horace Trant might have ended. Trant had hired me. His widow had paid me off with a kiss. It might have ended there—if it hadn't been for the phone call.

It came that evening as Bay City was girdling itself with its necklace of neon lights. I sat in my office at the Sneyder Building, looking downtown to where flashing lights spelled out *Dancing* over and over again in colored letters three feet high, chain-smoking my way back through the past twenty-four hours.

I was trying to put the Trant affair behind me; to concentrate on the case of a Mrs. Panton who wanted to find a Mr. Panton who had run off with a blonde. But a face with lustrous dark hair, enigmatic eyes and full, red lips kept coming between me and the work I had to do to justify Mrs. Panton's twenty-five buck retaining fee.

When the phone rang I had it off its cradle in two seconds flat. Afterwards I realized why. But it wasn't her. It was a man's voice.

"Johnny July?"

"Yeah."

"This is Tony Degas. I have to talk to you."

"About what."

"I have to explain to you what I was doing in Miss Beredine's room."

"Why to me? I'm not carrying a torch for her."

There was a ten second's pause. Then: "I know that. I just want to put myself in the right over the Trant killing.

Killing! He had used the word —not me.

I said, "The police are calling it suicide."

"How about you?" he asked.

I thought back on my talk with Loretta Trant. "I'm calling it suicide, too," I said.

"I heard different."

"You heard wrong, then."

That made him take time out for another ten second breathing spell. When he spoke again his voice had taken on an almost pleading tone. "I'd still like to talk to you. I'd pay for your time. I need advice."

"I'm a private eye."

There I went again, trying to talk myself out of some very useful dough. I wondered why. And then, quite suddenly, I knew why.

I had let Loretta Trant convince me on the suicide theory because it was the only way to play it. With her, Condon and the cops all lined up against me, it wasn't wise to stay unconvinced. Not if I wanted to stay in business. Maybe—considering Ralph Condon—not if I wanted to stay alive.

I still wanted to stay both alive and in business and talking to Tony Degas was the wrong way to go about it!

But what the hell! "Okay," I said. "I'll come over. Where are you?"

"At home." He sounded suddenly relieved. "Twenty-six Monterey Avenue. Know where it is?"

"I can find it. Be with you"—I looked at my watch—"in forty minutes."

I replaced the phone, knotted my tie back where they are usually worn, went out, climbed into the Chrysler and headed downtown.

Monterey Avenue was just out of town—a hard-packed dirt road turning off the main highway and climbing into the hills. The sky was purple over the hills as I set the Chrysler in high.

Presently the headlights picked out the number twenty-six on a mail-box as I took a turn. The mail-box was the only indication that anyone lived right there. I stopped the car, backed up a few feet, parked, got out, and hunted around for an opening. There was a path of sorts leading through the pines.

The needles made a soft carpet underfoot as I picked my way through with the aid of a pocket flashlight. There was moonlight in the clearing beyond the trees—and a cottage in the moonlight. It was like an old-time log cabin, only considerably bigger. There was a wooden porch out front with steps leading up.

I climbed the steps. The door had a knocker shaped like the

M.G.M. trademark. The sound of knocking echoed around the clearing as I used it. When the echoes died away there was silence again.

I circled the place. There wasn't a light at any of the windows. There was another porch in the rear. Another door. Ajar.

"Degas," I called, softly.

It didn't buy me anything. There was a tingling at the back of my scalp such as I had known many times before. Automatically my hand felt for my Luger. It wasn't there. And, quite suddenly, it dawned on me that it hadn't been there either when I had packed my suitcase at the Trant place that morning. It hadn't been in the pocket of my robe, or any place, in fact, since I'd been slugged and had passed out cold.

I told myself I was slipping as I pushed the door further open. "Degas," I called again, Still no reply.

I let the beam of the flashlight travel around the big main room. A wooden bench, heaped with fancy cushions, completely encircled the walls. Mexican blankets hung on the walls between the windows. There was a big, open, stone-built fireplace with a collection of hunting knives hanging above it. Beyond the fireplace steps went down to a door.

I catfooted across the room, went down the steps and found myself in a hall giving on to the front porch. The flashlight showed me a telephone receiver dangling at the end of its cord. I picked it up and stood listening. There wasn't a sound from the other end of the line. I put it back on its stand.

Several doors led off the hall. I spotlighted the flashlight on each in turn. All except one were closed. I put out a hand and pushed the one that wasn't closed the whole way. The room beyond was in darkness. I felt for the switch; clicked on the lights.

It was a bedroom. Presumably Tony Degas' bedroom. But Degas wasn't going to have any use for it ever again. He was lying sideways across the bed, his feet towards me. He was in blue silk pajamas. One slipper had fallen off his feet. His head was turned from me.

I checked behind the door. I was taking no more chances. There was no one there. Then I moved round to the far side of the bed. Tony's face was hanging the same way his feet were, upside down. There was a neatly drilled black hole between his eyes. A small dark worm had crawled out of the hole and down his upside-down forehead. On the fawn-colored carpet beneath the upside-down head was a black splotch of crusting blood.

Tony Degas, it seemed, had sought my advice a full hour too late. I wondered what Tony could have known about the Trant death that had made it necessary for someone to kill him.

Footsteps sounded on the porch outside. I felt myself go tense. I catfooted back around the bed and over to the light switch. Too late. Someone thudded heavily on the M.G.M. trademark. The sound of knocking echoed through the cottage.

I padded back across the hall and along the darkened main room. The back door was still ajar, the way I had left it. More heavy knocking. Time for me to do a quick fadeout. I opened the door the rest of the way—and found myself looking down the barrel of a heavy police automatic.

Swenson's hoarse voice said, "Back up, buster, and let's take a look at you."

I backed up. He came in. The lights came on. He looked surprised. But no more than that.

"You the guy who put in that phone call?" he asked.

"What phone call?"

More hammering out front.

Swenson said, "Meade will have that door down if we don't let him in. Don't go away."

He moved past me, through the hall, unbolted the front door. Meade came in, a tall, thin-faced cop with high cheekbones.

I said to Swenson again, "What phone call?"

"Someone called police headquarters. Asked for me. He didn't speak when I answered. Just went on breathing. I had the call traced. It came from this place."

He looked at the telephone.

I said, "The receiver was off when I found it. I put it back in place."

He nodded as though that was

satisfactory. I wondered whether he would be quite so satisfied when he heard about the corpse in the next room. He said, "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Degas called me to come on over."

"Why?"

"I didn't find out."

"Why not?"

I shrugged, and gestured towards the bedroom, avoiding his eyes. "Take a look for yourself," I said.

He took a look. I stood in the doorway while he bent down the far side of the bed. He stared up at me, his face a little gray.

"Okay," he said. "Who did it?"

"How should I know?"

"I think you know plenty, July. You were at the Trant place. Trant dies. This guy was at the Trant place. This guy dies. You're around again."

"You said the Trant death was suicide," I reminded him.

He snorted, and gave me a scornful look. "I still think it was suicide, July. But a guy has to have a reason for suicide."

"Maybe he wanted to keep the cops happy," I said.

"And maybe someone was crowding him over something."

"Stop pussyfooting," I said. "Say what you mean."

"Maybe a private eye doing a bit of blackmail on the side."

My fists balled at my sides. "That's nonsense and you know it. You've got a hell of a nerve talking to me like that."

"I'll talk to you any way I please," he rasped. He looked over my shoulder at Meade. "Call headquarters and have them send a homicide squad out to give this place a going over."

"Okay, Captain." We heard Meade using the phone in the hall; heard him replace it again. Suddenly he called, "Take a look at this, Captain."

I turned on my heel.

Swenson said, "Stay where you are, July. This is a police investigation now. *And keep away from that body.*"

He went out. When he came back he said, "Okay, July, give me your gun. I'm taking you down to headquarters."

"Don't make me laugh," I said. "You haven't anything on me."

"We'll see about that. Come on —your gun."

"I don't carry hardware for social calls."

"Where is it?"

"Back at the office," I said.

"We'll pick it up on the way to headquarters."

"I don't know that I can lay my hands on it."

My anger was rising.

Swenson said, sneeringly, "I don't know that you can."

It was only then that I noticed that he had one hand behind his back. He brought it into view abruptly. There was a gun in it. A

Luger. "This yours?" he asked.

Without knowing why, I was sure that the gun was mine. It was just one more crazy thing to go with all the other crazy things that had happened since Horace Trant hired me. Like a left-handed guy cutting his throat with his right hand. Or, if you couldn't accept that, like a guy getting his throat cut in a room from which no one could get in or out. Looking at it that way, it seemed the most natural thing in the world that Tony Degas should call me up for me to find he had been shot with my own gun. It was just one of those impossible switch-arounds that do happen.

"Okay," Swenson said. "Keep it to yourself. We can check the license number."

"Don't fret yourself. I know my own license number." I reeled it off at him. "Does it check?"

"Check." He grinned. A hard, tough grin with no humor in it. "I'm booking you for the Degas killing, July."

"Be your age," I said.

All it got me was a free ride down to police headquarters.

V

AGAIN I FOUND myself facing Swenson across the width of a desk. This time it was Swenson's own desk down at headquarters. And the atmosphere was decidedly more strained than when we had last faced each other across that desk in Horace Trant's study.

The desk lamp was tilted so that the beam fell full on my face. Swenson could see me all right. But I couldn't see him too well. His face was just a white blob in the shadows back of the desk lamp. A white blob among a lot of other white blobs, all tossing questions at me.

Swenson's voice came hoarsely out of the shadows. "Okay, July. You were sitting in your office. The phone rings. You answer it. Then what?"

"I've told you."

"Tell it again."

"I've told you a dozen times."

"Try again. Once more. You may have forgotten something."

The cops didn't believe me. You could hardly blame them. It was a hell of a coincidence. So they were making me tell it over and over until I tripped myself up, altered some little detail I hadn't quite gotten right the first time. Then they would pounce, working away until I caved in altogether. It's a system they have—a pretty good system provided they've pulled in the right guy. The trouble was that I was the wrong guy entirely.

I felt deadbeat. My eyes flickered wearily.

Swenson said, cynically, "Don't go to sleep on us, July. It isn't polite. You heard me—tell it again."

"It was Tony Degas," I heard

myself saying vaguely. "He said he wanted to talk to me, wanted some advice—"

"About what?"

"About the Trant killing."

"The Trant case was suicide."

"Okay. So it was suicide. Someone should have told Degas that. He called it a killing—not me."

I went on and on, mechanically, telling them the whole sequence of events. Telling it for maybe the twentieth time.

Swenson said, "You had your gun with you when you went out there."

"No," I said. "I told you. I didn't have any gun. I lost it at the Trant place. Someone slugged me and lifted it while I was slugged. They must have."

Swenson gave a hard, disbelieving laugh. "We don't like that version, July. Now how about the true one."

"I was slugged, I tell you. Knocked unconscious."

"With the police still in the place."

"Maybe the guy who slugged me thought it was safe enough with cops around who couldn't tell a suicide from a homicide."

I heard Swenson's quick intake of breath. I should have kept my big mouth shut.

But before the storm could break over me there was an interruption. Voices sounded in the doorway, one of them a hard, shrill feminine voice raised loud in protest. The rest of the lights went on. I saw Swenson swing around.

"What goes on?" he demanded.

A blonde stood in the doorway —a blonde with an expensive beauty shop hair-do. There were a couple of cops with her. One had hold of her arm. She jerked it free.

"Let go of me," she shrilled. "I'm big enough to find my own way around."

One of the men with her said, "She turned up at the Degas place."

Swenson lost interest in me. He turned to the blonde. "What's your name, sister?"

She looked back at him as though he was something that had crawled out from under a stone. She helped herself to a chair without being invited. "Vicky Chandos," she said.

Eyebrows raised themselves. I knew the name even if I hadn't met the blonde before, personally. Vicky Chandos was Ralph Condon's latest strip-tease attraction at the *Boccaccio*, one of Bay City's better-class clip-joints.

Swenson said, "What were you doing at the Degas place?"

"Be your age, copper." She tossed it back at him insolently.

Swenson said, "Tony Degas got himself killed tonight."

That jarred her. Her mouth opened into a round red 'O', and stayed that way for several seconds. Under its layers of make-up

her face had gone deathly pale. When she spoke again she was a lot less self-assured.

"I don't know." Her lips trembled a little. "I could do with a cigarette."

A young cop sprang up with an extended pack. When he sat down again Swenson frowned at him severely. He turned back to the blonde.

"How well did you know Degas," he asked.

She gave a brittle laugh. "Pretty well. He was a nice guy."

"Someone didn't think so."

That jarred her again. Her head came up sharply. "Wasn't it suicide?"

"Why should it be?"

"I don't know. I just thought—" She broke it off.

"You'd better tell us what you do know."

She drew hard on the cigarette while she thought it out. Presently she said, "I went out there just now because I was pretty worried about Tony. I dropped by earlier on, on my way to the club. He was behaving strangely. Like he was scared of something. His nerves seemed all shot to pieces. He was drinking to steady them, but drink only seemed to make him worse."

"Go on," said Swenson.

"I didn't like leaving him alone, the way he was, but I had to go on at the club. He had a gun."

"What sort of gun?" It was my voice asking the question.

Vicky Chandos said, "Just a gun." Her hands moved. "About so big. Black." She went on talking. The gun she described could have been a Luger.

My gun was in the centre drawer of Swenson's desk. He had put it there when it came back from fingerprinting. The result had been negative. The paraffine test they had given me had been negative, too. Little things like that hadn't seemed to matter to Swenson. Not then. But now, as I reached over and pulled open the drawer, he did nothing to stop me.

I held the Luger up for the blonde to see. "Was that the gun?"

"All Lugers look alike," Swenson said. "How would she know?"

"I'd know all right," the blonde said. "Tony's had a queer kind of scratch on it. Like a love-knot. I noticed it when I was trying to talk him into giving it me."

I tossed the Luger across to Swenson. "Take a look."

The scratch was there all right. I knew it was. It was my gun the blonde had seen Tony Degas handling.

"Then this isn't your gun, July?" Swenson said.

"Yes, it is."

"But this has that love-knot scratch on it."

"Sure it has, but it's still my gun."

"But—"

"Somebody slugged me—remember? Somebody took my gun

while he had me out cold. It could have been Degas. He was at the Trant place. Whoever it was, my gun ended up with Degas."

Vicky Chandos said, "What is all this about?"

"The cops think I killed your boy friend," I said. "It happens to be my gun. I lost it twenty-four hours ago."

"But how did Tony get it?"

Swenson said, "More to the point, what was he doing with it?"

The blonde said, "The way he was behaving earlier tonight, I was scared he was going to bump himself off with it. That's why I tried to get him to let me have it. But he wouldn't."

"Well, this let's me out," I said.

Swenson wheeled on me. "How do you figure that?"

"It proves I was telling the truth about losing my gun. Isn't that obvious?"

"It still doesn't prove you didn't kill him." I could tell from the way he said it that he had lost a good deal of his original conviction. He shrugged. "Okay, July, so I'm turning you loose. But that doesn't mean I think you're one hundred percent in the clear."

"Thanks for nothing," I said. "Do I get my gun back?"

He shook his head. "This one's evidence. Better buy yourself another."

Vicky Chandos looked at me with interested eyes. She said, "You a private detective?"

Swenson said heavily, "He likes to think he is. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just curious."

But she was more than curious. There was something on her mind.

Swenson turned to me. "Go on —beat it. And try to stay out of trouble for ten or twelve hours at least."

One of the other cops said, "Your car's out front, July. We tooled it into town for you."

VI

I SAT IN THE driving seat of the Chrysler and foraged for the half-bottle of bourbon I kept by me for emergencies like this. The liquor went down warm and comforting. I didn't quite feel a new man, but I figured the old one could get by a little longer.

I put what remained of the bourbon back in the glove-pocket and started the engine. I drove around the corner of the block, did a U-turn in strict defiance of Bay City traffic regulations, parked the Chrysler by the curb and walked back to the intersection. I stood in a doorway across the street, chain-smoking time away while I watched the entrance to police headquarters.

Vicky Chandos came out a half hour later. A policeman was with her. A prowl car came round the block and pulled in to the curb. She got into it. When the prowl

car began to climb Monterey Avenue I climbed with it, fifty yards back, driving on my dim lights.

The prowl car stopped at the Degas place. There was a convertible parked out front which I figured belonged to the Chandos dame. I drove on, stopped round the next bend with the engine idling and waited for her car to catch up.

We climbed and circled for maybe another mile, the blonde in the convertible and me in the Chrysler. Then the convertible turned up the short, sloping drive of a small house. I watched her run the car into the garage. I cut the engine of the Chrysler, and got out. When she came out of the garage I was waiting for her, quietly puffing on a cigarette.

She didn't seem surprised. "Hi, there," she said. "Come inside and let me cry on your shoulder.

She unlocked the door and I followed her into a long, low living-room littered with rugs, cushions, French dolls and quaint little glass animals. She shrugged off her fur coat.

"Fix us a drink each," she said. "You'll find everything in the kitchen."

I fixed the drinks and carried them over to where she sat on the couch. I said, "Why were you so interested when you knew I was a private detective?"

She looked back at me over the rim of her glass. "With the right

sort of investigator I could make myself some fast bucks."

"What sort of investigator?"

"One without too many scruples."

"Only a guy with a solid gold Cadillac can afford scruples these days."

I wanted to find out just what she was playing at. Had she a tiger by the tail? She sipped her drink. Presently she said, "It was true what I told the cops about Tony—only it wasn't the whole truth. He was scared sick over something he'd found out about the death of old man Trant. When I reached his place the first time tonight he was on the phone. I walked straight in, the way I always do.

"I heard him say, 'Leave me out of it. I don't want to get in-

volved.' Then he saw me standing there and hung up real quick. When I asked him what was wrong, he mumbled something about old man Trant's death being murder, not suicide."

She reached over for cigarettes, put two between her lips. I lit them for her. She passed one to me. Her lipstick had a sweet, sharp taste.

"He wouldn't tell me any more than that. He was really scared. He kept trying to get rid of me; kept waving that awful gun about. I left in the end. But I only drove down the road a way, then I parked and walked back. He had the light on in the hall and I could see his shadow on the glass of the door. He was on the phone again."

"What time was that?"

She told me. It checked. Degas had been calling me.

"What then?" I asked.

"I hung about a few minutes longer. I don't know why. I was worried about the guy, I guess. I was fond of him in a way. Then I knew I'd be late at the club if I didn't get started. So I went back to the car."

She paused, drawing deep on the cigarette. "Another car came up the road as I climbed in. It went past and pulled up right alongside the path leading to Tony's place. I'd have gone back to check on who it was, but Condon turns ugly if I don't get to the club on time."

"Too bad you didn't go back. Whoever was in that car was the person who killed Tony. It couldn't have been my car. I couldn't have made it in the time."

She shook her head. "No, it wasn't your car. There's only one car as flashy as that in town." She paused for effect. "It was Loretta Trant's car."

When I got the slackness out of my jaw, I said, "Why didn't you tell the cops?"

She stubbed out her cigarette, very firmly. "Like I said, I figure there's some easy-to-come-by money in it." Her face was hard, bitter. "She killed him and now she's going to pay all the way."

"Where do I come in?"

"You go see her. Keep me out of it. Tell her you've got some dope on Tony's killing you think the police ought to have."

"Blackmail?"

"Sure, blackmail. Why not? She killed him, didn't she? She should be good for ten grand—for a start."

Naturally I didn't go along with the blackmail idea, but I didn't say so. Right then I wanted Vicky Chandos on my side—for the time being. And I had my own idea how to play things.

That was how I came to drive out to the Trant place the following day. The maid answered the door. I asked for Mrs. Trant and waited in the large, well-lighted hall. She vanished through an

arched doorway to the right of the stairs. She was back in a couple of minutes.

"Mrs. Trant is out, sir," she said.

The look in her eyes carried no conviction at all. I brushed past; went in through the arched doorway without knocking. I was in Horace Trant's study. And I wasn't alone.

Loretta Trant was seated at Trant's desk going through a pile of papers. She looked up as I came in. Her face was flushed, angry looking.

"I said I couldn't see anyone."

"You said you were *out*," I reminded her.

"What difference does it make? It amounts to the same thing."

"Does it?"

She got up and came round the desk. She was wearing fancy black jeans and a tight-fitting black sweater. She leaned back against the desk. "Well?"

"I didn't altogether understand her attitude. We had parted on completely friendly terms—with a kiss to sweeten the parting. But now she was the same way she had been when we stood in the bedroom beside the blood-stained body of her husband. Suspicious, truculent, on the defensive.

When I didn't say anything, she said, "I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

"Why not?"

She shrugged.

I said, angrily, "I'll tell you why not. Because you thought you'd bought me off with a kiss that probably meant nothing to you."

Her eyes flickered. "I didn't ask you to kiss me."

"And you did nothing to discourage me either."

"You interpret that as trying to buy you off."

"What else?"

"Maybe I just like being kissed. Maybe it did mean something. Maybe it's a long time since a man kissed me as though he meant it."

She walked over to the window, looking out on the cool green lawns beyond. She said, over her shoulder, "I'm quite sure you didn't stop by just in the hope of being kissed again."

"I'm here to blackmail you," I said, slowly.

That brought her round facing me. "I thought blackmailers usually came to the point with more finesse."

"I wouldn't know. It's my first attempt. Maybe I'm not very good at it."

"Good or bad, you'll end up with the same long prison sentence." She crossed to the phone and let her hand close over it.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. It won't get you anywhere. Blackmail has to be proved. You hear me out and arrange to pay me off. You do it with marked bills, then let the cops pick me up. It's

done that way in all the best mystery paperbacks."

She looked puzzled. "You're talking very strangely. I don't believe you are here to blackmail me." Her hand came away from the phone.

"Someone else thinks I am." I drew hard on the cigarette, let the smoke come out real slow. "Someone who saw you at Tony Degas' place last night."

"It's a lie," she said. "Tony Degas was killed last night—" She broke it off.

"Precisely. Tony Degas was killed and you were there."

"Who told you that?"

"Never mind who. Just a very reliable someone."

"It's surprising the police haven't called to question me."

"The police haven't been told."

She met my gaze squarely. "I didn't go out at all last night."

"Can you prove it?"

"I don't have to. Not to you."

"To the police, if necessary?"

"I—" She turned away with a despairing gesture. "No, I guess I can't prove it." She turned back. "There must be a few thousand other people around here who can't prove where they were last night either. Why me? Why not them?"

"They didn't have their cars parked outside the Degas place around the time Tony was murdered."

"But I didn't have the car—" She stopped. Her hand went up to her mouth.

I stubbed out my cigarette. "It's a very conspicuous car. The person who saw it is quite definite about it."

She walked back to the chair at the desk, and sat down. She put her elbows on the desk, cradled her head in her hands. I stood over her.

Presently she looked up. "What is it you want?"

"That's better." I sat down on the edge of the desk, touched her arm lightly. "I want the truth," I told her. "The truth about last night. The truth about the night your husband died."

"But why? It's not your concern."

"I'm making it my concern. Like the man said, your husband hired me, paid a retainer. I'm going to see the thing through."

She gave a tired smile of almost reluctant admiration. "Johnny July," she said, "if we weren't on opposite sides of the fence, I could find it in me to like you."

"Do we have to be on opposite sides?"

She nodded. "There are some things a person has to see through on her own. Do me a favor, will you? Stay out of this."

I shook my head.

"But can't you see—your interference won't do any good. And it may do a lot of harm."

"Look, lady, I'm seeing this

thing through. On your side if you like. On opposite sides if you insist on playing it that way. But I'm seeing it through. I don't think your husband committed suicide—and neither do you. I don't know how he was killed, but I'm convinced it wasn't by his own hand. And I know that the killing of Tony Degas is tied in with it."

I hadn't intended to raise my voice, but it went out of control. It brought a flash of fire back into her eyes. She said, "Now you listen to me, Johnny July. I'm warning you. I can be as tough as you—and I have influential friends in this town."

She was good and mad again. Her eyes were pure ice. I swung away; paused in the doorway. "Any time you decide you want a friend, the phone book will tell you where to reach me," I said.

She didn't answer. She just sat there looking at me with a hard, strictly dead-pan expression on her lovely face.

She must have had that phone in her hand while I was still skidding the Chrysler off the Trant estate and on to the main highway.

They were waiting for me in the lobby of the Sneyder Building—Swenson and his sidekick, Meade. Swenson, as usual, didn't look very friendly.

"I want to talk to you, July."

"Help yourself."

He gestured towards the elevator and we went on up to my office. The instant the door closed behind us, Swenson said, "I warned you to stay out of trouble."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that you've just been out to the Trant place."

"Any law against that?"

"There could be. Get wise to yourself, July. You're not welcome there."

"Who says so?"

"Mrs. Trant says so. She's just phoned in to file a complaint against you."

I'd been wondering just what had given them the excuse they needed to threaten me in my own office.

"On what grounds?" I demanded.

I waited with a mounting uneasiness for the answer. But it wasn't blackmail. Swenson said, "She complains you deliberately forced your way into the house after she said she didn't want to see you." He wagged a finger under my nose. "Now get this straight, July. Get it straight and remember it. My department will do all the investigating that's necessary in this town."

"I've got a living to earn," I protested, with mock solemnity.

"Well, earn it the easy way by sticking to divorce cases. Stay out of murder of I'll book you for obstruction. I mean it, July!"

"Do that," I said, "and I'll file a complaint that you're interfering with my legitimate business."

"Such as?" I asked quietly.

"Such as investigating what Horace Trant hired me to investigate."

"Trant's dead. Your assignment died with him. You've got no grounds to stick your nose into this and you know it. Unless someone hires you—"

The door opened, and a mocking feminine voice said, "But somone did hire him. Didn't he tell you?"

Swenson and Meade both swung around. They looked exceedingly surprised.

Swenson said, "Yeah! Who hired him?"

"I did," said Judith Beredine, calmly.

VII

SHE CLOSED THE door behind her and peeled off her gloves. "Mr. July came out to our place because I asked him to come. But he didn't know it was I who called him. He thought it was my sister. Our voices sound very much alike over the phone. That's why he asked for her. It was all a misunderstanding."

Swenson looked a shade less certain of himself. "I had no way of knowing that," he said. "It was your sister who complained."

"She would." Judith's voice was acid sweet. "And now perhaps you'd like to go. Mr. July and I have business to talk over."

When the door had closed behind Swenson and Meade, I sat down on a corner of the desk, and regarded her steadily for a moment.

"Why the lies?" I asked, finally.

She shrugged. "They weren't really lies. I was going to call you anyway. Then I saw you leaving the house, and heard Loretta phoning the police. I came on after you."

"Why were you going to call me?"

"I want to hire you."

"For what?"

"To investigate Horace's murder."

"So it *was* murder."

"I think so."

"Not according to your statement to the police. You said he was alive just before you and Degas broke in."

Her medium-blue eyes were mildly surprised. "Oh, no. I said I heard noises in his room. That's something quite different." She leaned across the desk towards me. "I think Horace was murdered, Mr. July. I'm hiring you to prove it."

"What reason would anyone have for murdering him?"

"Because he came to see you."

"You know why he came to see me?"

She nodded. "He was thinking of changing his will. Whether he did so or not would depend on what you found out."

"Such as?" I asked and waited.

She shrugged. "Such as the relationship between Loretta and Ralph Condon."

"Are you trying to tell me Loretta killed him?"

"Not necessarily. It could have been Condon."

"Why didn't you tell the police you thought it was murder?"

"I didn't think it was—then." She hesitated, pleating her gloves with nervous fingers. "Something Tony Degas told me started me thinking." She bit her lip. "It wasn't true what I said in my statement—about getting Tony from his room. He wasn't in his room. He was in my room." She paused to moisten her lips.

I waited for her to go on.

"Tony was in my room when I went to see Horace. It was true what I told the police about needing money. I needed it for Tony. He was in debt. I wanted to help him out. I thought Horace would let me have the money."

"Wait a minute," I said. "What difference does it make that Degas was in your room and not his own?"

"Just this. He came in through the French window, using the balcony. That brought him past the French window of Horace's room and when Tony—"

"Go on."

"When Tony came by, Horace's French window wasn't locked. It was a couple of inches ajar. Tony could hear Horace and Loretta talking."

"What about?"

"I don't know. It's not important, anyway. The important thing is that that window wasn't bolted the way it should have been."

"Bolted and screwed down tight," I said. "When did Tony tell you all this?"

"When you found us together in my room."

"But he didn't tell the police?"

"I asked him not to. I was trying to protect Loretta."

"And now?"

"Now I'm not protecting her any more. She killed Horace—or had him killed. She's my sister and I was willing to cover up for her. But Tony's murder alters things. I loved him."

"But why should she kill Degas? How did she know what he'd seen?"

"That was my fault. It slipped out. We had a row—me and Loretta—and I tossed the book at her. It was a fool thing to do." Her lips trembled. "I guess it was really my fault Tony died."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

She opened her bag, pulled out a roll of bills.

"Here's five hundred dollars! Is that enough? I'll pay whatever sum you ordinarily get for taking on a difficult case."

I gathered up the bills, stowed them away.

"This is enough for now, Miss Beredine. You may even get a refund. I'll see what can be done. This will of your brother-in-law's —who has that?"

"His lawyers, I guess. Martin and Quinheart. Why?"

"I'd like to take a look at it."

After she'd gone I sat a long time trying to sort things out. Nothing made sense. Then I drove round to the law firm of Martin and Quinheart. It was a swanky set-up. Ankle-deep carpets, maplewood walls, the most costly kind of air conditioning. I sat time out in the reception office until Quinheart himself consented to see me. He had a long thin late nineteenth century-type face with shaggy, overhanging eyebrows.

I said, "The Trant family have retained me to investigate the killing of Horace Trant."

That jolted him.

"Goodness gracious me. The papers called it suicide."

"You mustn't always believe what you read in the papers."

"Apparently not. How can I help?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Trant's will."

He leaned back in his chair, hooked his thumbs in his vest, let his fingertips meet across his chest. I could picture my great grandfather being awed by him back in the eighties. "I presume you have written authority."

I tried to bluff it out. "I told you —I'm working for the Trant family. Surely that's sufficient."

"Yes, you told me, young man. You could also have told me you were working for President Kennedy. That wouldn't make it a fact."

"Of course not," I said, smoothly. It amazed me he didn't say Present Grover Cleveland. "I've brought my credentials with me."

I brought out my wallet and tossed it on the desk so that he could see my private-eye license. It was a bluff that usually worked. This time it didn't. He reached for the phone.

"You won't mind if I call Mrs. Trant and check?"

"Not at all. But it won't help. I'm not working for Mrs. Trant. I'm working for her sister, Miss Judith Beredine."

His hand came away from the phone. "I take it you mean that you haven't Mrs. Trant's permission to see the will."

"Not exactly—"

"Then I bid you good morning."

That was that. I came to my feet. "Do me one favor, will you?" I said. "Check that the will is still there."

He frowned. His eyes flickered towards the big steel safe in the corner. "What nonsense is this?"

"Forget it," I said.

I went out. I had found out what I wanted to know. And it was plenty.

VIII

NICK DONOVAN seemed just the lad for the job. I called him up when I got back to the office, arranged a rendezvous for nine-thirty. I was on the point of leaving the office again when the phone buzzed. It was Vicky Chandos. wanting to know how I had made out with Loretta Trant.

"Not so good," I told her. "The lady in question has friends in high places and doesn't scare easily."

"Who're you kidding? You mean to say she's not worried sick at the idea of me going to the cops and telling them about the car I saw."

I had to stop her doing that. I said, "Baby doll, she's so little worried she's already been to the police herself."

"What happened?"

"The cops happened. They stopped by at my office and told me to lay low, or I'd find myself behind bars on a blackmail rap." I had to scare Vicky into sitting good and tight for the time being. I added persuasively, "You'd better stay clear of me for the time being. The cops are tailing me. For all I know, they're listening in on this phone call."

I heard her gasp, and the line went dead. I gave a sigh of relief. Vicky Chandos was a dame who might make trouble if she was allowed to. A stop-at-nothing dame with an eye for the main chance. Now it seemed she was buttoned up for the moment at least.

The rest of the day was spent catching up on some long over-due sleep. I set the alarm to wake me at nine. At nine-thirty I picked up Donovan. We parked the car two blocks away from the Martin and Quinheart building and walked the rest of the way on foot.

Donovan was a real artist at his work—even if it was work of which the cops could hardly be expected to approve. A strip of celluloid was all he needed to open the office door. I followed him in, spot-lighting the room with a pocket flash.

He knelt down in front of the safe, adjusted a stethoscope with one hand while the other caressed the dials. It took him exactly three minutes and forty seconds to get the door open.

There was a pile of deed-boxes inside. I lifted out the one labelled TRANT, HORACE. It was locked, but that kind of lock was child stuff to Donovan.

I riffled through the wad of papers inside. Trant's will, when I found it, turned out to be a straightforward document. Except for a few minor legacies, everything went to Loretta. It didn't seem to get me very far. Unless . . . unless Loretta had been pushed for quick money. More money than old man Trant had been prepared to give her. Condon

. . . maybe she owed him money. Maybe he killed the old man to hurry things along. I shook my head. It didn't seem likely.

I went through the rest of the papers. It didn't buy me anything. There were the purchase deeds of the Trant estate, an inch-thick wad of business contracts, a hundred thousand dollar insurance policy. The policy had been taken out four years before and was drawn in favor of Judith Beredine. The company was Twin-Ocean.

I sighed heavily and replaced the papers. Donovan did the rest. When he was through it would have been impossible to prove anyone had been there. I paid him off outside and drove back to my apartment.

Vicky Chandos sat at the top of the stairs waiting for me.

I said, "I thought I warned you to keep away from me."

"You warned me." She sounded a little high. "Then I got to thinking that maybe you were giving me the run-around."

"What does that mean?" I asked when I got her inside.

"That maybe Loretta Trant paid off after all, and you're holding out on me."

"Dames like you make me sick."

She only grinned. "I've had another idea," she said.

"Take it some place else, then."

"Maybe if Loretta Trant won't pay off, someone else will."

That gave me quite a jolt.

She said, "Maybe Loretta Trant did react the way you said. Maybe you didn't even ask her. Either way, there's someone else who'll pay plenty to keep her from being involved in anything."

"Condon," I said. "Oh sure—he'd pay, but maybe you wouldn't like his kind of payment."

She shook her head. "Not Condon." She moved away from me. "The kid sister—Judith Beredine."

"Don't be a fool," I said. "It wouldn't work. And she's no kid."

Her voice was acid sweet. "But it has worked."

"What?"

"Sure. I called her up a half hour ago. I told her about her sister's car being outside Tony's place. I didn't tell her who was calling, of course."

"Of course," I echoed, cynically.

She grinned. "I put it very nicely. I said that of course her sister couldn't possibly have had anything to do with Tony's death, but wouldn't it be awkward if the police found out about the car. She thought it would. She thought it was worth ten grand. She said it would take a little time to raise the money."

It didn't make sense. But then, nothing was making sense any more.

I said, "Suppose she tells her sister?"

"Well?"

"She might go to the police."

"You told me she'd already been to them."

I let it ride. I said, "She might even play it another way—the way someone played it with Tony Degas."

"I've thought of that. I told baby sister I was going to write it all down. In a letter to the cops which will be found in my safe deposit box if anything happens to me."

"What happens now?"

"I call her tomorrow night. She'll have the money by then."

I didn't like it. There was something wrong—somewhere. Judith, the way she had told it to me, wasn't going to pay out good dough to cover up for her sister.

"Look, Vicky," I said. "Don't call her. Let me handle this. There's a catch in it somewhere. There are things you don't know."

"What things?"

I said, angrily, "Never mind what things. You stay out of this. You hear?"

"You just try to keep me out, brother."

She left on that.

I sat back, trying to make sense out of a lot of senseless nonsense. Like a razor someone had moved to make murder look like suicide. Like a bolted window that someone had seen open. Like . . .

Suicide? Something flickered in my subconscious. Something I had seen in small print on that insurance policy in Martin and Quinheart's office. I moved over to the desk and hunted out my own policy. It wasn't as lavish as Horace Trant's had been, but the terms would be much the same. I began to read all the small print.

This policy shall be null and void in the event that the person insured die by their own hand within a period of five years dating from the initial payment.

Trant had died within the five years. So suicide made that policy null and void. I wondered if Judith Beredine knew about that.

I dragged out a phone book and hunted up old man Quinheart's private number.

"This is the Twin-Ocean Insurance Corporation," I said. "This policy of Mr. Trant's in favor of Miss Beredine—"

"See me at the office in the morning. This is not the time of night to be talking business."

"But this is urgent. We might pay out on the policy after all."

"I've already told Miss Beredine you wouldn't."

I choked back an exclamation. "When did you tell her?"

"This morning."

"Did she know about the suicide clause before then?"

"Not as far as I know. She knew the policy existed, of course. But what has all this got to do—"

I hung up on him. I had found out what I wanted to know.

There were still one or two

points to be cleared up, in particular whether the French window of Trant's room had been open or shut when he was killed, but I knew something of where I was going now.

The door buzzer sounded. Maybe it was Vicky Chandos back with another of her bright blackmailing ideas. It wasn't. It was a couple of guys with scowls on their faces and their hands in their pockets.

"Back up, buddy." Their hands came out of their pockets as they followed me in. They carried hardware all right.

IX

ONE WAS TALL and thin, the other short and husky. The tall, thin one said, "Take a look round, Eddie."

Eddie went through the apartment, came back. "Just him on his own, Joe."

Joe nodded as though that was satisfactory. "Okay." Let's get going."

He moved round into a position which left me with nothing I could do about. Eddie opened the door and went out again. A moment later he whistled.

Joe prodded me with his gun. "Get going. Don't try anything. We're not afraid to take chances. We're well paid."

There was a big black car parked out front. The rear door was open. Eddie was sitting inside, his gun still in his hand.

Joe said, "In you go, buddy."

I got in. Joe slammed the door, went around front, climbed up behind the wheel. The car purred away like a dame's hand stroking mink. We headed uptown. When we hit the honky-tonk district I knew where we were going.

The *Boccacio* had almost as many lights as Times Square. The car took a turn and nosed up a driveway. We drove into the parking lot. Joe cut the engine, got out, waited for me gun in hand.

Zigzagging iron steps led up the back of the building. I followed Joe up. Eddie followed me. We went in through a storeroom littered with broken-down slot machines. There was a stretch of corridor and a sliding door. Beyond the sliding door, Condon sat behind a big desk, smoothing that hair-line mustache of his.

I said, "What the hell is this, Condon? You want me to file a complaint with the cops?"

He grinned, showing white, well-formed teeth. "You wouldn't do that." He put a cigar between the white, well-formed teeth. Eddie gave him a light. Joe stayed right behind me.

Condon said, "It seems you can't stop pestering a mutual friend."

"If you're talking about Loretta Trant, say so. It's none of your business anyway."

"I'm making it my business."

"Everyone's making it their business, including the police."

He nodded. "Mrs. Trant told me she'd complained. It seems you don't take much notice of the police though. You've been around to see her lawyer since."

So old man Quinheart had been passing the word along.

"What's it to you?"

"I'm a good friend of Mrs. Trant's."

"How good?"

He looked at me a moment through half-closed eyes. Then he came around the front of the desk. "I happen to be quite fond of her."

"That's not news. The whole of Bay City knows that."

He scowled. "I wouldn't want to see her mixed up in anything." He stubbed out the cigar. "Look, July—the law is happy with things the way they are. They'll go on being happy unless someone stirs up mud. You're stirring as hard as you know how. I don't know why."

Condon dragged open a drawer and took out a roll of folding money. "There's ten grand there. Take it and blow town. If you show your nose in Bay City again I'll have you attended to—permanently."

It was more money than I had ever had in my life at any one time. I picked it up to let my fingers get the feel of it. Then I tossed it back.

"You can't buy me, Condon. Maybe you can buy Loretta Trant because money means a lot to her."

That was a mistake. His face darkened. His hand whipped me viciously across my face.

"Why, you cheap, dirty, snooping, little—"

His hand whipped me more viciously at every word. I wasn't taking that. I slammed him back—a short-arm jab to the belly. He staggered back, his arms swiping the cigar box from the desk. I went after him.

Joe's voice said, "Steady!"

I stopped where I was. Condon gasped for breath. When his lungs were functioning properly again he said, "You've had your chance, July."

"Okay," I said. "So I've had my chance. Now you listen to me. You think Loretta Trant killed her husband. I don't. Give me a chance and I think I can prove it."

The look in his eyes said that he didn't believe me. He jerked his head. "Keep talking!"

"You'll have to admit that I've gotten around a good deal in this case," I said. "Isn't that so? If it wasn't—you wouldn't be so angry right now you can't think straight."

"All right, you've gotten around. What does that mean—or prove? How does it benefit Mrs. Trant and myself? You've worked yourself in so deep you're nothing but a liability and I don't like liabilities

just on principle. When they're a very great meance and could destroy the women I love—"

"Why don't you stop jumping to conclusions? If I'm in deep, as you say, it could mean I'm very close to the real killer. And suppose I told you I'd like to see Loretta Trant cleared of all suspicion. I quarreled with her, sure. But only because she took a crack at my integrity. Call her up now and ask her. Ask her if she honestly believes I don't like her. I do like her. And I've forgiven her for losing her head, just as you're doing now. I know what you're both up against. I know what strain can do when it becomes almost intolerable."

A look of indecision, of half-belief, came into Condon's eyes. I pressed on with the advantage, jerked out all the stops.

"Give me a chance and I'll deliver the real killer to the police—tied up in a neat brown parcel. And it won't be Loretta Trant. Swenson won't be able to explain away the evidence I'll have in my briefcase. Not if he hires the shrewdest mouthpiece in the rat-protection racket. Well—how about it?"

For a moment I thought he was going to shake his head and say no—I just hadn't been persuasive enough. But you can never tell with the hard-to-convince type when they're looking desperately for a straw to clutch at. All at once, he seemed to believe me. The dangerous hostility went out of his eyes and was replaced by a dawning belief in me.

If that belief was still shot through a little with doubt and misgiving it didn't prevent him from saying, "All right, I'll forget what I had planned for you. For the moment—I'll forget that I may be acting foolishly. You're free to go. But you'd better make sure I'll never have any reason to regret this decision. I'd have no scruples at all about smashing you if you should take it into your head to play both ends against the middle."

IX

THE SAME PRETTY maid answered my ring. I didn't give her a chance to ask me my business. I brushed past her, catfooted across the hall, and took the stairs three steps at a time.

"You—come back here," I heard her call after me.

I kept going. There was no time for questions and answers. I headed straight for the room in which Horace Trant had died, let myself in, and clicked on the light. I crossed to the French window, hunkered down on my heels and took a good close look at the screw which prevented the bottom bolt from being withdrawn.

It was red with rust. It had been in there a long, long time. I scraped

at it with my fingernail. A little of the rust came away, but there was no sign that it had been unscrewed recently.

I sat back on my heels and considered the problem. That screw have never been taken out since it had been put in. That meant the bolt had never been withdrawn. It also meant that the french window had never been opened. So Judith Beredine had been lying when she said that Tony Degas had seen the window raised.

The maid came into the room. I didn't give her a chance to say anything. I got my pitch in first.

"When did Mr. Trant have these screws fitted?"

"About eighteen months ago," she said.

The bits and pieces were beginning to fit. I came to my feet, brushed past the maid, raced along the corridor. I heard her shouting after me.

I came to Loretta Trant's room, knocked, went in. She was seated at her desk. Her eyes narrowed when she saw it was me.

"I thought—"

I cut in on her. "You thought I'd been taken care of. Long enough for you to decide what to do about Judith."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. You know who killed your husband—and how it was done. You knew it was murder right from the start. You switched the razor around to make it look like suicide."

I was bluffing, guessing. It got a reaction, but not the sort of reaction I had expected. "Wrong again, Johnny July. It was Ralph —" She bit it off sharp; bit it off too late. I'd been hoping she'd make just that kind of a slip.

"So Condon switched the razor around. He was covering up for you. He thought you'd done it. You let him go on thinking that because you needed his help."

She shook her head. "You're crazy. No one killed my husband. It was suicide."

"Judith doesn't think so."

That got her. Her eyes widened in shocked disbelief.

"Judith?"

"Sure—little sister Judith. She thinks it was murder. She hired me to prove it was you."

"No!" She came to her feet, her body heaving. "Judith wouldn't do a thing like that."

"She did it, all right. She did it because there's a no-suicide clause in an insurance policy made out to her. Insurance policies always carry such clauses, but she didn't know that at first. When she found out, it became necessary to turn the Trant 'suicide' into murder if she was to collect. That meant throwing strong suspicion on someone. She picked you."

"I don't believe it."

"No? Then let's go and ask her. Where is she?"

"In her room, I guess.

She followed me as I led the way along the landing to Judith's room. The maid tagged along, too. Apparently she was still a little worried about what I was planning to do.

I went into Judith's room without knocking. I looked around quickly, leaving the door ajar. There was no one there. A sudden panic gripped me. I grabbed Loretta's arm. "Where is she?"

"How should I know? Please—you're hurting me!"

"It's important—maybe a matter of life or death."

Her eyes fought with mine. Mine won. She swept out on to the landing. "Justina, do you know where Miss Beredine is?"

"She went out, madam. About twenty minutes ago. Right after the phone call."

"What phone call?"

"Some woman, madam. She didn't give her name."

"Did Miss Beredine say where she was going?"

I said, "I know where she's gone."

I raced off along the landing. "Wait, Johnny," Loretta Trant called after me. "I'm coming, too. What's it all about?"

I said, as we dashed down the stairs and across the hall, "Unless I miss my guess, she' gone to see a girl named Vicky Chandos—in your car."

"Why my car?"

I stopped for a second to grab her by the shoulders. "Don't you see, you little fool—she's trying to frame you."

I let go of her again and we ran down the outside steps to where I had parked my car. I pushed it up to sixty as we headed for Monterey Avenue.

Loretta said, as we drove, "I don't understand, Johnny. Why should she try to frame me?"

It wasn't going to be easy. But she had to be told. I said, "For some reason or other, your husband took out an insurance policy in her favor."

She nodded. "He didn't want to alter his will, but he wanted her to have something when he died. He was quite fond of her, you know."

"He'd been fond of her, all right," I said. "But it hadn't bought him anything—except a razor slash across the throat. She couldn't wait for him to die. So she killed him, and tried her best to make it look like suicide. Condon unwittingly helped out by moving the razor, thinking he was protecting you. Only there was a no-suicide clause in the insurance policy. That meant turning the suicide back into murder before she could collect. So she came to me. But that wasn't until after Degas was killed."

"Why should she kill Degas?"

I wasn't sure. I said, "Either he was in on the first killing with her and she wanted him out of the

way, or he knew more than he should have known. He phoned me the night he died. She must have known about that call; must have raced to his place to stop him talking to me. She went in your car."

She said, quietly, "I see."

I wondered if she did.

"Degas had a girl friend—Vicky Chandos. She saw your car outside his house the night he was killed. She wanted me to blackmail you. When I didn't get results she decided to try herself. To try Judith."

"But why Judith?"

"Because Judith was your sister. Because Vicky Chandos thought she'd pay off to cover up for you."

"Maybe that's what she is doing. Maybe that's where she's gone."

"You don't really think that. She's gone to see Vicky Chandos, all right. But not to pay any blackmail. She's gone to kill her. To kill her because she knows Vicky's got a letter addressed to the cops locked away stating that it was your car she saw outside the Degas place the night Tony was murdered. Once the cops lay hands on that letter, they're going to be after you."

"But how would that help Judith get the insurance money?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. My guess is that once the cops arrest you for killing Vicky Chandos and Tony Degas, our little Judith will cook up something else to tie you in with the death of your husband."

I could feel her trembling beside me. We were climbing Monterey Avenue now. We were past the road which led through the trees to the Degas place. We came to Vicky's house. I braked hard, cut the engine, raced for the door.

Then I stood stockstill. There wasn't a light on in the place.

Suddenly a chill doubt crept into my mind. A completely dark house was hard to explain. Unless there was some very grim reason for the lights to be out.

Loretta Trant was beside me. "What's wrong?" she asked, her voice tremulous with apprehension.

I didn't dare tell her I was almost sure we had arrived too late.

I tried the door. It was unlocked. Loretta followed me in. We went from room to room, switching on lights, switching them off again. On the threshold of each room I steeled myself afresh to face the sight of Vicky's dead body. But we went through the whole place without catching a glimpse of Vicky.

I sat on the couch, my head in my hands. I had been so sure about everything. It was the obvious place. A nice, quiet, out-of-the-way place for another killing. But I had been wrong.

Loretta said, "You say Vicky

Chandos was blackmailing Judith?"

"She thought she was."

"Then she'd name the place where the money was to be handed over."

"I suppose so. But where does that get us?"

"She'd hardly name her own place, would she?"

Loretta was right, of course. A blackmailer doesn't usually invite you home. Everything was so confusing that I'd let myself drift with misleading cross-currents, entirely in the wrong direction. Now I was thinking straight again. Vicky Chandos would have named the place of meeting.

And then I knew the place she would name. A place that would appeal to her twisted, cynical outlook on life. The Degas place . . . the place where Tony had been killed.

I came to my feet, grabbed Loretta's hand, and made for the door. I pushed her back into the car, got in myself, turned the car around, and headed down-hill as fast as I could make it. I skidded to a standstill near the road which led through the trees.

But there was no sign there of any other car. Suddenly I felt defeated again—frustrated and discouraged.

And then, in the glare of the headlights, I saw them—the tire-marks in the soft earth. They were clear and distinct, leading off the road and disappearing along the path between the trees. I wondered about that as I scrambled out. And then I didn't wonder any more. I knew that Judith was making sure—making quite sure the police would be led straight to Loretta.

It was only a chance that anyone would see the car if it was left outside, but tracks in the earth would still be there for all the world to see once the body of Vicky Chandos was discovered.

I raced along the path, with Loretta following a few steps behind. A car blocked the way. We picked our way around it through the trees.

"Yours?"

Loretta nodded silently.

There was a light in a window as we reached the end of the path —the window of the room in which Tony Degas had died.

I grabbed Loretta's hand and raced for the back door. Our feet made no sound on the soft earth. The door was closed, but when I tried the handle it opened easily, with no creaking of hinges.

"Not a murmur," I whispered in Loretta's ear.

I tried to picture the layout of the room in my mind, so that we could avoid obstacles. A small table teetered unsteadily as we jolted into it. I made a grab at it, steadying both the table and my thumping heart at the same time.

The door of the bedroom was

slightly ajar, and a sliver of light shone out into the hallway. It lit the steps which led down to the groundfloor terrace. I motioned to Loretta to stay where she was and crept forward on my own.

From inside the room the shrill, off-key voice of Vicky Chandos said, "You can't get away with it." She didn't sound any too sure of herself.

Mocking laughter followed. Then a voice said, "Oh, yes, I will."

It was Judith Beredine's voice, only I didn't recognize it at first. There was something different about it—something almost fanatical.

Vicky was trying hard to keep her voice steady. "You seem to forget—I've put it all down in writing. The police will find it when they go through my things. It will lead them straight to your sister."

Again that laugh—a high-pitched, slightly hysterical laugh.

"To my sister, yes. It couldn't be improved on." Her voice was suddenly hard, assured. "You fool. You've played straight into my hands. I want the police to arrest my sister. And you're going to be the means of making sure that she'll be tried and convicted."

Vicky Chandos sounded very scared. She said, "You don't have to kill me. Let me live and I'll go to the police. I'll tell them about the car."

"Oh, no. I don't trust you. Besides, telling them about the car might not be strong enough evidence. This way I'll make sure. She'll die for killing you and everyone will be convinced that she killed Tony Degas and her husband, as well."

"You—you mean she didn't kill Tony?" Vicky's voice rose to a fresh pitch as the obvious hit her in the face. "You killed Tony. You did it. It was her car, but you were in it."

"Naturally I was in it. And I killed Tony because he knew too much. He was going to blab to Johnny July. Now you're going the same way."

Vicky's voice was a shriek. "No!" she screamed. "No!"

I didn't wait to hear more. I went into the room with a gun in my hand, and with every intention of using it if necessary.

X

VICKY CHANDOS WAS cowering back against the far wall, her hands flattened at her sides. She was dressed exactly as she had been on the night when they'd brought her down to police headquarters for questioning. But she looked a different woman in the expensive garments now. Her face was deathly pale, her lips trembling, her eyes wide with fear. She saw me, but was far too terrified to take in what she saw.

Judith Beredine was facing her, a gun in her hand. She had her back to me.

"Okay, Judith," I said. "You can drop that gun. If you attempt to use it, I'll shoot to kill!"

Judith swung around, her eyes blazing. She gave a coarse laugh. The gun did not clatter to the floor.

"Well, look who's here."

I heard Loretta come into the room behind me, heard her voice over my shoulder. "Do as he says, Judith. Drop the gun. There isn't going to be any more killing. You don't have to worry. I know you're not well. I'll see that you're properly taken care of."

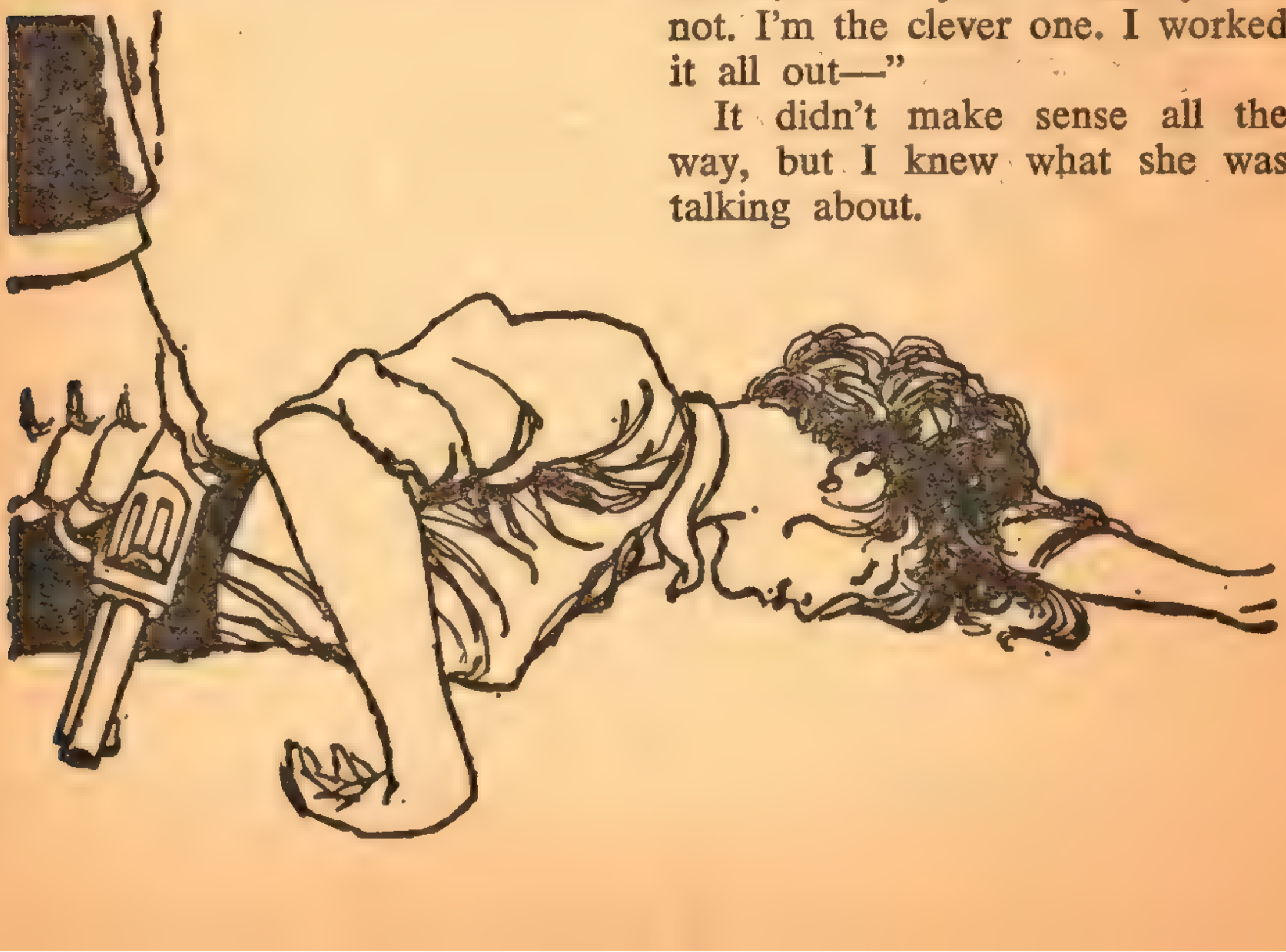
Judith back away from us across the room. There was madness in her eyes, and I knew that at that moment she was more like a crazed trapped animal than a human being.

"If it isn't the big, kind sister," she cried. "So that's what you and Ralph Condon have been cooking up between you. I'm to be sent away to a mental institution and kept there until I die. Oh, no—not for me. You think I'm mad, don't you? Well, I'm not. I'm sane for the first time in my life."

Loretta said in a pleading, soothing voice, "Of course, you're sane, Judith. But you're not well. You need—nursing care. After a few short weeks you'll be able to come back and things will go on just as they were."

Judith shook her head, her lips writhing back from her teeth. "You all think you're so damned clever, don't you? Well, you're not. I'm the clever one. I worked it all out—"

It didn't make sense all the way, but I knew what she was talking about.



"Do you want to know how I did it?"

I said, quietly, "We know how you did it, Judith."

Her eyes swung to meet mine. There was something in them I hope never to see again in a woman's eyes as long as I live. There was madness there, and hate, and jealousy—and something that was all of those things combined. There was also—pure viciousness, utter degradation.

"You can't know. No one knows." She spat the words at me.

I said, "It was clever all right—I'll grant you that. If you hadn't let the fact that Horace was left-handed muddle you up, if the terms of the insurance policy hadn't made it necessary to turn suicide back into murder, you might have gotten away with it."

"Go on," she jeered. "Let's hear it all."

"You didn't find Horace dead, as you told the police." I was guessing, but I was pretty sure of my ground. "You found him alive. Alive, but doped. You put something in his whisky nightcap."

The look she directed at me told me that I wasn't far wide of the mark.

"You went to see him, all right, but not to ask him for money. You needed money, but you knew where you could get it—from the insurance. You had it all worked out. You knocked on the door. He didn't answer. You knew he wouldn't answer, that he was in a drugged sleep. Then you pretended you were panicky and ran to get Tony Degas.

"He broke the door down for you. You immediately screamed as though you had already seen Horace with his throat cut. That was to be your alibi—that he was already dead when you and Degas went into the room. That you and Degas *both* saw him lying dead—"

Vicky Chandos cut in on me. "It's a pack of lies. Tony wouldn't be a party to any killing," she said.

"Not knowingly," I said. "That was the devilishly clever part of it. *Auto-suggestion.* Scream hard enough, yell at Tony to go and awaken Loretta. Say afterwards that you and he had both seen the body on the bed and he would back you up because he would be convinced that he had remained for a moment at your side, staring across the room at it."

Loretta nodded. "He said just that. The police showed me the statement he made to them."

I turned back to Judith. "With Degas out of the way—gone to awaken Loretta—you ran across to the bed. The razor was in the pocket of your housecoat. One quick slash and the job was done. All you had to do then was wipe the handle of the razor, press it against the slain man's fingers and drop it. Then you staged a fit of hysterics so when Degas got back

with Loretta they suspected nothing."

Judith said, "You think you're damned clever, don't you?"

"Not as clever as you thought you were. But you weren't quite clever enough. Degas saw something he wasn't meant to see. Only the fact didn't dawn on him till later. When it did he sneaked into your bedroom again to talk to you. You thought he might prove dangerous. You thought I might be dangerous, too. Somehow you persuaded him to sap me and take my gun."

"I told him you obviously suspected him."

"That was kind of you," I said.

Loretta said, biting her lip. "I still can't believe it. You're my sister, Judith. Say it's all a ghastly mistake, that you never intended me to be blamed for the killings!"

It was the moment I had been waiting for. Loretta was between me and Vicky now. Judith was no longer looking at me. Her whole attention was concentrated on Loretta, the gun in her hand covering no one in particular.

I dived at her. My arms wrapped themselves around her, jerked her off-balance. My own gun was an impediment. I let go of it, using both hands to turn her around and twist her arms up behind her back.

"Another squawk out of you, and I'll break your wrists," I said, warningly.

She was suddenly still. I looked around for something to secure her with.

It was Loretta Trant who helped me by whipping a green-leather belt from the waist of her dress and handing it to me with the tears running down her face.

In a matter of moments I had Judith bound tightly. I then walked silently toward the telephone to call Swenson and headquarters.

A New MIKE SHAYNE Story Next Month

THE SAWDUST COFFIN

by ROBERT L. ROSEKRANS

A murder witness is always in danger . . . of being number two.

HOLLIS MCKEON could feel the coming snow in the crisp night air as he strode across the field toward Muskrat Pond. A flush of pleasure rose into his thin face as he thought about the way that Miss Jarrett, the principal's secretary, had smiled at him that morning as they passed in the hall.

Now, as he reached the barbed wire fence that skirted the edge of the pond, the full moon slipped behind one of the ragged black clouds.

He fumbled for a strand of wire to crawl through the fence when the voice boomed at him out of the darkness.

"You're not going to ruin my career!"

Hollis dropped to the frozen ground, his heart pounding. In the half-light he could see the dark outline of a sedan, parked in the rutted lane that skirted the pond. A man and a woman were struggling at the front of the car. As he watched the man's hands clawed at the woman's throat, forcing her back over the fender. He could hear the harsh rasp of her breathing as she fought frantically to free herself.

He wanted to run, knowing that he should. But he was fascinated, hypnotized by the unequal strug-

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gle. Slowly the woman's hands fell to her side. The man backed away, and she slumped jerkily to the ground.

As he watched the man picked her up, and staggered back toward the rear of the car. He heard the trunk lid slam and a moment later the man came back along the car.

The moon drifted out from behind a cloud, enabling him to see the killer clearly. Hollis sucked in his breath sharply. The man was Rodney Preston, his biology teacher!

A few moments later the car turned around and headed back along the rutted lane toward the old river road.

Hollis McKeon was frightened. A cold shiver raced along his spine and he began to shake, his strength draining away. The wind stirred beyond the pond, rustling the cat-tails and whispering in the bare limbs of the elm above him. He leaped to his feet, bulling his way through the barbed wire fence, and went racing off across the meadow.

When he arrived at the barn his father had already lit the two Coleman lanterns and had stanchioned the cows. He found his milking stool and pail and sank down beside his first cow.

He listened for a moment, hearing the steady metallic sound of milk hitting his father's pail. Then he said: "Pa?"

"Yes." His father looked up.

"Pa, what would you do if—if you seen a murder?"

"Reckon I'd keep my blamed mouth shut. Get away as far as I could."

"Suppose—suppose the killer was somebody you knowd, Pa. Suppose—"

"Suppose, suppose!" his father said irritably. "You got too much imagination, that's what. Last month it was them flying saucers. Milk your cow, Boy!"

WHEN HE ARRIVED for his first hour biology class next morning Mr. Preston was at the specimen tank smiling at the students as they filed into the laboratory. His blond crewcut was freshly trimmed and he looked fresh and at ease in his blue pin-striped suit. He don't look like a man who has committed a murder the night before, Hollis thought.

Suppose he'd been mistaken! Suppose the murderer just happened to look like Mr. Preston. He remembered what his father had said about the trouble you could get into by having too much imagination.

"Now students," Mr. Preston was saying, "suppose we gather around the table and continue our dissection of *Rana Catesbine*."

"Bull frog," one of the girls said.

"Mighty puny one," Hollis scoffed. The girl was one of the eight or ten students who always

snickered at his clothes. "I catch 'em bigger than that one."

"Oh?" Mr. Preston said, the sharp dissecting knife poised over the dead frog.

"Yes, sir. Out at Muskrat Pond."

Mr. Preston looked blank. "I don't believe I recall this place."

"It's easy to find," Hollis said. "You just go up the lane from the old river road. It's a perfect place to—"

He stopped, wishing he hadn't spoken. Mr. Preston was watching him. Hollis could see the little beads of perspiration on the teacher's forehead.

"A perfect place for what, Hollis?" Mr. Preston's smile swept the room. "To take your best girl, Hollis? Is that what you're trying to say?"

A couple of the girls standing behind him laughed. He felt the nape of his neck starting to turn red. Why did they always have to laugh at him? Miss Jarrett never thought his behavior ludicrous, or made fun of his clothes.

Mr. Preston looked smug until the laughter had died down. Then he said briskly: "Now let's get back to our dissection of the *little Rana Catesbina,* shall we?"

For the remainder of the hour Hollis could feel Mr. Preston's eyes probing at him. But he was sure that the biology teacher hadn't seen him by the pond. It had been too dark. Maybe he ought to talk to Joe Scott. Joe would know what to do.

When the noon bell rang he hurried across the parking lot to Miller's Lunch Room. He found Joe Scott hunched over a bowl of chili at the far end of the counter.

The old deputy grinned at him as he slid into the stool at his side. "Hi, Hollis. How come you're eatin' out? You sell one of them muskrat hides you trapped last year over by the ice house?"

Hollis shook his head. "Joe—has there been any girl reported missin'?"

"Girl?" Joe wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Not that I recall. Your gal run out on you, Boy?"

"It ain't that," Hollis said quickly. He glanced down the counter to where Sid, the counterman, stood with one foot on a milk case talking to a hairy-armed truck driver. "I gotta tell you somethin' real important, Joe."

"Sure, Hollis. What's got you so excited?"

"Can—can we talk outside, Joe?"

"Sure." Joe Scott finished his last spoonful of chili and stood up. The four-year-old Ford that Barrettsville County furnished Joe for a police car stood at the curb in front of the drug store. When they were seated, Joe said: "Now, what's this that's so all-fired important we gotta talk out here, Boy?"

Hollis swallowed hard. "Joe—I seen a murder last night!"

"You seen *what!*"

"I ain't lyin', Joe. Honest I did!" The story tumbled out. When he was finished his hands were trembling, his face flushed.

Joe Scott sat for a long moment, chewing silently on his cud of tobacco. "Don't suppose you know who they was, do you, Boy?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Hollis said. "The man was—was Mr. Preston."

"Rod Preston? The All-American who teaches at the school? Now wait a minute, Boy."

"It was him!" Hollis said. "I'm sure of it."

Joe looked at him over his steel-rimmed glasses. "You see the girl?"

"Uhuh."

"Did anybody say anything?"

Hollis nodded. "The man—Mr. Preston—said 'you're not going to ruin my career.' "

Joe pursed his lips. "That's all. The girl didn't say nothin'?"

Hollis shook his head. The deputy was going to be just like his father, he thought. He looked down at his hands, wishing he could have told his mother. His mother always believed what he told her. But she had a bad heart, and he couldn't go telling her anything that would rile her up.

"You don't believe me, do you, Joe?"

"I ain't sayin' I don't," Joe protested. "You've never lied to me, son. It's just that—well, you could have been mistaken. Dark and all that. Rod Preston just ain't the kind of feller to go around killin' folks. And besides, there ain't no woman been reported missin'."

"Maybe no one has started wondering what happened to her yet," Hollis said. "He could have hid the body somewhere." He looked at Joe. "Couldn't he?"

"Sure," Joe admitted. "Sure he could. Now if we was only to get a report of a missin' girl I could—"

Hollis opened the door. "Thanks for listenin', Joe."

Joe put his hand on his arm. "Now you look here, Boy. You and me have been friends a mighty long time. I ain't sayin' I don't believe you—"

Hollis sat watching his friend, his hands in his lap.

"Look," Joe said patiently. "I can't go accusin' Preston without any evidence, now can I? Thad Wallace would have my hide."

"I suppose not."

Joe Scott smiled. "Good," he said cheerfully. Why don't we just have a milk shake together and put off worrying about it until we have something more to go on."

Hollis moved out from under his hand, and raced off toward the school. If Joe Scott refused to take his story seriously how could he hope to convince anyone else?

As he hurried past the drug store he glanced in through the

window. Standing beside the newspaper stand, a magazine half hiding his face, was Rod Preston. He smiled benignly out at Hollis.

Two days later, while he was dressing after basketball practice, Hollis heard two players talking about Miss Jarrett.

"That's right. She ran off with some guy."

"You're kidding!"

Someone nudged Hollis. "Hear that, Hollis? Your best girl ran off with some other guy."

"That's a lie!" Hollis shouted, grabbing his belt and shoes and fleeing the locker room. He sat on the steps outside the door and pulled on his shoes, a cold hand gripping his heart. It—it couldn't be! Oh, God, it couldn't be Miss Jarrett! He had to know, had to find out now!

A few moments later he pushed open the door marked *Principal* and went inside. Miss Walcott, stiff backed and angular in her high-necked old-fashioned dress glowered at him.

"Well?" she demanded.

Hollis forced a smile. "I—I was wonderin' what happened to Miss Jarrett?"

"Humph! Miss Walcott snorted. "She's run off with a man. And good riddance, I say. Always makin' eyes at men, didn't matter if they was sixty—or sixteen." Her eyes glared at him over her pince-nez. "Why do you care, Hollis McKeon?"

"I owe her two dollars," he lied.

"Well you can keep your money. She's gone!"

"Can you tell me where, Miss Walcott?"

Emma Walcott fished a crumpled envelope out of her pocket and thrust it at Hollis. "She sent this from Chicago. No return address."

He opened the single sheet of white paper. The note read:

Dear Miss Walcott:

I'm sorry to leave like this, but I'm getting married to a man I've known since I was a child.

The words 'Lucy Jarrett' were typed across the bottom of the page.

"Lucy Jarrett," Hollis said aloud.

"Lucy Jarrett, indeed!" Emma Walcott sniffed. "Always wanting us to call her *Miss* Jarrett. Her and her high-falutin' airs!"

The telephone in Miss Walcott's office shrilled. As she waddled back to answer it Hollis headed for the door, Miss Jarrett's note clasped tightly in his hand.

The Barrettsville County Sheriff's office was a few blocks south of the school. It was in an old stone mansion with turret-like towers, blackened now by the soot from a thousand locomotives. Thad Wallace, Barrettsville's sheriff, sat at his battered desk, double chin resting on his chest, listening to the baseball game on the radio.

"Ah, Hollis," he wheezed, waving his cigar. "You comin' to report some more flyin' saucers?"

"No, sir," Hollis told him. "I want to see Joe Scott."

"He's upstairs in the squad room," Thad said, returning to his game.

Joe swivelled his head as Hollis opened the door. "Oh, hi, Boy. What's on your mind?"

"I think I got somethin' important."

Joe took his feet off the window sill.

"I think Miss Jarrett is missing, Joe."

"John Holmes' secretary? Say, I did hear she left town. Gettin' married, ain't she?"

"She ain't marryin' nobody!" Hollis blurted out. "She'd have told me if she was. She's my friend." He thrust the note into Joe Scott's hand. "Here's a note Miss Walcott got. But she didn't write it."

Joe Scott read the note as Hollis watched. He read it slowly, a heavy frown on his face.

"Nobody ever called her Lucy," Hollis insisted. "How come she'd sign this note 'Lucy Jarrett'?"

Joe Scott sighed deeply. "Hollis," he said wearily, "how come you ask so many damn fool questions I can't answer?"

"I—I don't mean to, Joe. Could it be a fake? The letter, I mean. Couldn't somebody else have typed it?"

"I reckon so," Joe admitted. "But why?"

"Maybe so nobody'd look for her."

"Now wait a minute," Joe said. "You ain't gettin' no ideas about her bein' the woman you seen get murdered, are you?"

"I—I don't know."

"Look," Joe said. "You might as well forget about this letter. We got no strong reason to doubt she didn't write it."

"But ain't there no way we can make sure?"

"Well," Joe said, scratching his head. "If we could find the typewriter that she used."

"What good would that do?"

Joe laced his fingers behind his head. "Typewriter keys are like fingerprints," he said. "Keys on different typewriters print different. Give me ten letters and I'll tell you in a minute which ones were typed on the same machine."

"How can you tell?" Hollis asked.

"With a magnifying glass. You take a letter—say a 't'—and you check the 't' on all the sample copies you have made. When you find 't's exactly alike, they were made on the same machine."

A few minutes later when Hollis went out past Thad Wallace he was sleeping, his hands folded over his massive stomach. He went down the stone steps and headed back toward the school. It had started to snow, large, lazy flakes

that drifted against his face as he hurried along the dark street.

Most of the classrooms in Barrettsville High were dark. As he opened the side door and slipped into the building he could hear the murmur of voices from the gym. He hurried along the darkened, deserted hall until he came to the first of the three typing rooms. He pushed open the door, fumbled for the light switch, and turned on the lights.

He found a pad of paper, tore off several sheets, dividing each sheet into four sections. Then he numbered each section with the number of the machine he was using. After he had typed on all of the machines in the room, he moved on to the next room.

He inserted a piece of paper into one of the typewriters and poised his fingers over the keys. Suddenly he felt that he was not alone in the room. He whirled about. Rod Preston stood in the doorway, his hands folded, watching him. In the void of silence Hollis could hear his heart begin to pound.

"Well now," Preston said, unfolding his arms and moving slowly up the aisle toward Hollis who sat very still, a look of fear in his eyes.

The biology teacher stopped beside the boy. "May I ask what you are doing here at this hour, Mr. McKeon?"

"I—I wanted to see how these typewriters worked," Hollis said.

Mr. Preston smiled. "Thinking of buying one perhaps?"

"N-No, sir."

"Suppose one of the teachers missed something from her desk, and she found that you had been in her room?"

"I guess I didn't think about that, sir."

"Well," Preston said heartily, dropping his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Suppose we call it a night, eh?" His cool eyes studied Hollis' face. "Did you find what you were looking for this noon?"

"This noon?"

"Yes. I saw you talking with Joe Scott."

Hollis felt his heart skip a beat. "We were talkin' about—about muskrat trappin'."

"I see," Preston said. He flicked off the lights and followed Hollis into the hall. "Can I give you a ride home?"

"Oh, no, sir. I—I've got my bike. Thank you just the same, sir."

"That's too bad," Preston said. "I would have enjoyed a ride tonight. You live in the country, don't you, Hollis? Out near this Muskrat Pond you spoke about, I suppose?"

"Y-Yes, sir."

"I suppose you take the old river road home?"

"That's right, sir." He could hear the roar of the crowd watching the Fresh-Soph basketball

game in the gym, wishing that he were there.

"And when you walk I suppose you cut across the fields?"

"N-No, sir. I still take the road."

"You're lying to me!" Preston snarled. "You were at Muskrat Pond the other night!"

Hollis pointed a shaky finger at his teacher: "Then you were the man! You killed her!"

Rod Preston's hand exploded against his face, slamming him back against the wall. Then the hand reached out and twisted into his collar and Hollis struggled, gasping for breath.

"Now you listen to me! You can't prove a thing. Who's going to believe a sixteen-year-old kid against an All-American football player? Keep your damned mouth shut, and stay away from Scott! If I catch you talking to him again your life won't be worth a nickel. You understand?"

He released his grip and Hollis raced along the hall, shouldered the door open and ran across the parking lot. He could feel the cold sweat on his forehead. He had no doubt at all that Preston had meant what he had said.

That night after he had finished his chores he hurried upstairs to his room. He found the magnifying glass that he used with his stamp collection and carried it with him to his work table. Spreading out the sheets he had typed, along with Miss Jarrett's note, he began to study them. As Joe had suggested, he examined the letter 't' carefully. He checked and discarded one sheet after another, finding nothing. When he glanced at his watch it was eleven-thirty.

Three more to go. He examined the next sheet, discarded it, and moved on to the next. Suddenly he sucked in his breath. He found Miss Jarrett's note and placed it next to the sheet, moving the glass from one to the other. The 't's were identical. And so were the 'a's. Number fourteen had to be the machine that had typed both notes.

He glanced at his watch again. A quarter of twelve. His hands trembled as he put the sheet, together with Miss Jarrett's note, into the big pocket of his overalls. He had to get the evidence to Joe Scott, and fast. Now maybe he would be believed.

He stepped out into the darkened hall, listening for sounds from his parents' room. Everything was quiet. He moved carefully down the steep stairs to the kitchen, where he slipped into his sheepskin and pulled on his rabbit-lined mittens. Outside the wind shouldered against the eaves, rattling the windows.

Opening the back door he stepped out onto the porch. The moon was high, riding full and bright in a cloudless sky. He moved his eyes slowly to the corn

crib and past it to the apple orchard deep in shadwos. He could be out there watching the house, he thought. Waiting for me. He hesitated, his heart pounding wildly, his throat suddenly very dry. Then he moved down the steps, feeling naked and frightened and terribly alone in the bright moonlight.

Two miles, he thought. Two miles of open country. Two miles of hedges and shadows and places to hide. Places where Rod Preston could wait to pounce on him as he hurried past.

He pulled his collar about his head and moved off, trotting along the snow-drifted fence row. A half hour later he was moving along the sidewalks of Barrettsville, under the welcome streets lights casting their little halos of light on the elm-lined street. Most of his fear was gone now.

He was in luck. When he arrived at the Sheriff's office he saw Joe Scott's old Ford parked at the curb. He found Joe in the upstairs squad room.

"Hollis! What the devil you doin' out this time of night?"

"I got it, Joe!" Hollis said, thrusting the papers under Joe Scott's nose.

"Hold it a minute, Boy," Joe said, fumbling for his glasses.

"I found the typewriter, Joe!"

"Well now," Joe said, holding the two papers under the gooseneck lamp. Let's have a look-see, eh. Give me that magnifying glass out of that desk drawer."

Hollis waited tensely as Joe examined the two papers. Then Joe nodded slowly. "Same machine, all right. Where'd you find it?"

"Room one fifteen at the high school," Hollis said. "The number of the typewriter is written on the sheet."

"Hold on a minute," Joe said, reaching for the telephone.

A few minutes later Thad Wallace ambled into the squad room, his small eyes heavy with sleep. "Now what's this all about?" He glanced dourly at Hollis. "Don't tell me it's more about this lost woman of yours?"

"Looks like the boy's got something, Thad," Joe said. "Have a look."

Thad Wallace studied the two notes under the magnifying glass. "Same machine," he announced. "But what does it prove?"

"The machine's at the high school, Thad," Joe told him.

"So?"

"So maybe the boy's got something. What would this Jarrett woman be doing typing a note on that machine, then mailing it in Chicago. That's fifty miles away. Why didn't she mail it here, in Barrettsville?"

"It don't prove nothing," Thad said. "Not one damned thing. Maybe she wrote the letter and forgot to mail it until she got to Chicago. One thing I'm damned

sure about. I ain't accusin' Rod Preston of any murder on this kind of evidence.

He looked at Joe Scott. "That all you wanted to see me about, Joe?"

Joe Scott nodded.

"Then I'm hittin' the sack. G'night."

He went out of the squad room and Hollis could hear his heavy tread on the stairs.

"But, Joe! You said if I found the—"

"I know," Joe said. "I know."

"Wh-what do we do now, Joe?"

Joe Scott walked to the window and stood looking out at the snow. "We need a body," he said. "That's what we need right now, Boy. A body."

Hollis squeezed his fists together tightly, struggling to hold back the tears. He didn't want to find her body, yet he knew that he must. He looked at Joe, half-deciding to tell him what Rod Preston had threatened to do to him if he didn't keep his mouth shut. But he decided against it. Joe was on his side now. No use pressing his luck.

"Ten after one," Joe said. "Come on, Boy. I'll drive you home."

Riding back in the cold police car with Joe, Hollis stared straight ahead, trying not to cry. Before it had not been so hard, not knowing for sure that Miss Jarrett was dead. Now that someone else believed it too, it was different. For the first time the enormity of it came over him. Miss Jarrett *was* dead!

They came over the hill and Hollis could see the white clapboard house bathed in moonlight. "Let me out here," he said. "I'll walk the rest of the way."

"Sure," Joe said, squeezing the boy's thin arm. "You take care of yourself, you hear?"

Hollis got out of the car and stood by the side of the road, watching as the police cruiser moved back up the hill. After the sound of its engine had died away he began to sob, the tears streaming hot down his cold cheeks.

When he awoke next morning the ground was covered with snow. He'd have to start thinking about his traps, oiling and cleaning the rust off them. And he'd have to stop and talk with Mr. Bellows about trapping his property from the pond to the old ice house, like he had last year. Then he suddenly realized how unimportant all that had become now.

When he arrived at school several of the teachers' cars were already parked in the special section set aside for them. Mr. Preston's dark blue Ford sedan was there. He stopped his bike beside it. Could there be anything inside the car that would help him in his search?

He got off his bike, leaned it against the fender of Miss Wal-

cott's old Chevvy, and walked slowly around Rod Preston's car.

"Thinking of buying a car now, Hollis?"

Hollis jumped, whirling about and almost bumping into Rod Preston. The biology teacher was bareheaded and was wearing a black turtle-necked sweater. Hollis could see the man's muscles rippling under the sweater. His face was emotionless, his eyes coldly intent.

"N-No, sir. I was just lookin'—"

"Still being nosy, eh? Still not minding your own business. That could get you hurt real bad, Hollis. Real bad."

"Y—Yes, sir."

IT WAS EIGHT o'clock when Hollis finished his shower and left the locker room. He had checked the bulletin board earlier. Mr. Preston had an adult class that would keep him occupied until after eight-thirty.

He stopped in front of his locker, opened it, and took out a battered flashlight. Then he went back along the dimly-lit hall and out the side door to the parking lot. It had been snowing and a thin layer of powdery snow covered the dozen or so cars in the lot. He crossed quickly to Rod Preston's blue Ford.

He had made his plans during his afternoon study period. If he should be caught he would say that Mr. Preston had sent him to look for a fountain pen he thought he might have dropped inside the car while shuffling through some papers.

He made his search systematically. Front seat, glove compartment, under the front seat, behind the visor, even under the floor-mats. He found nothing but a pair of paper clips, a collapsible drinking cup, and some sawdust near the brake pedal. He glanced at his pocket watch. It was eight twenty-five.

As he emerged from the car the door of the school opened and two women came out. He turned quickly and strolled back toward the bike racks. The two women hurried past, chattering about a club meeting, and completely ignoring him.

He backed his bike out of the rack, mounted it, and rode out across the deserted supermarket parking lot. As he reached the street Joe Scott's battered black Ford moved silently past him and turned up the street toward the front of the school.

Hollis pedalled slowly along the snowy street. He was bitterly disappointed. But after all—what had he expected to find in Rod Preston's car? How very unlikely it was that anything had been left in the car which would help him to find out where Lucy Jarrett's body was hidden. He rode faster. It was no use. She was gone, and Mr. Preston was still free.

Ahead of him he could see the

old ice-house, silhouetted against the moonlit sky. He'd have to talk to Mr. Bellows tomorrow for sure. In exchange for trapping rights he knew that he would again have to help him haul sawdust from the sawmill to pack around the ice blocks to keep them from melting during the hot summer months. That was part of their bargain. It sure took a lot of sawdust to—

"Sawdust!" he shouted, jerking the handlebars and almost driving the bike into the deep ditch. He had found sawdust on the floor of Mr. Preston's car, hadn't he? A real clue, and he had been too dumb to realize it.

It was snowing harder now, and the wind was whipping it against his face, chilling him. If the storm kept up, there would be three or four more inches on the ground by morning.

He pedalled faster, squinting into the driving snow. When he reached the wooden bridge that crossed the deep ditch to the sawmill he passed over it without slowing.

A sign on the wire-mesh gate read: KEEP OUT! *Trespassers will be Prosecuted!* He leaned his bike against the gate-post, and climbed the gate.

HOLLIS' HANDS were trembling as he lifted the latch, and swung the ice-house door open on its creaking hinges. He was frightened, there was no use denying it. He stepped inside the dank building. The whole place was cold, forbidding, with the smell of decaying wood strong in his nostrils.

He took the flashlight from his belt and placed it atop the twelve-foot-high wall of two-by-sixes that kept the sawdust and ice blocks from spilling out into the space where the blocks were swept clean of sawdust for loading. He could see the cleat ladder nailed to the logs which supported the wall. A long-handled shovel stood beside the ladder.

He grabbed the shovel and began to climb the ladder. He stepped over the top board and sank to his knees in damp sawdust. Swinging the light about he found a narrow ledge a few inches from his head. He placed the flashlight on it so that the light was on the sawdust.

Then he began to dig, working slowly, tossing the sawdust over the wall to the bare earth floor. He shovelled until he found a block of ice, then put down the shovel and dug all about the block with his gloved hands. It was slow work, frightening work, not knowing what the next shovel of sawdust might uncover.

Every fifteen minutes or so Hollis would drop the shovel from sheer exhaustion and slump down on the edge of the wall to rest. His arms ached and he could feel the perspiration under his arms, cold

along his spine. But he forced himself to go on.

Suddenly, the blade dislodged another block of ice. He searched about with his hands, finding nothing. Then a thought struck him. A man who was smart enough to bury someone in an ice-house would sure be smart enough to know that the bottom blocks were seldom reached before a new year's crop was harvested and stored on top of the old ice.

He waded through the sawdust to the ledge, picked up the flashlight and played it across the wall until he located the broom used to sweep off the blocks. He climbed down, got the broom, and carried it back with him into the ice compartment.

Carefully he began to probe with the broom handle. He moved slowly, pushing the broom up to its straws in the cold, wet sawdust.

After a moment he struck something. It gave a little. He threw down the broom and began to claw at the sawdust with his hands. In a few minutes his fingers touched a rough fabric that sent the blood surging through his veins. He flicked the light into the hole. It was the sleeve of a woman's coat. Protruding from the sleeve was a clenched hand!

Hollis could see the red nail polish, and the little flecks of sawdust clinging to the fine blonde hairs on the back of the hand.

He wanted to run, to get out of there fast. His nerves were taut, screaming for release. Almost he surrendered to the kind of utter panic which would at least have carried him out of that place of death, that sawdust coffin!

He dropped to his knees, digging furiously until he had uncovered the murdered girl's head and shoulders. He leaned back on his haunches and trained his light down into the hole. Into the beautiful, frozen face of Miss Jarrett!

"Oh, no!" he sobbed. His shoulders racked with the intensity of his grief. "Please! Oh, God, no!"

Then something jerked him back to his senses. A rasping sound that knotted his muscles, sending spasms of fear through his thin body. Someone was at the door. Someone was about to enter the ice house! The boy's breathing quickened.

He slid his hand over the flashlight, snapping it off. He listened, holding his breath, hearing the creak of the hinges above the soughing of the wind against the roof.

"Hollis?"

It was Mr. Preston! He flattened out in the damp sawdust, his fingers gripping the handle of the shovel.

"I know you're up there," Preston shouted. "I saw your bicycle outside."

Hollis waited, his fingers clutching the shovel, his nerves stretched to the breaking point. He had to

get out, had to tell Joe Scott that the search had ended.

"You found her, didn't you!" Preston screamed. There was a moment of silence. Then his voice went on, almost pleadingly now. "I had to kill her, Hollis. Don't you see? She—she was going to have a baby. I had no choice. I was going to be assistant principal. The scandal would have ruined me."

"She was my best friend!" Hollis shouted. "She understood me! You didn't have to kill her."

"I'm coming up there."

"No!"

Hollis heard Preston move across the earth floor, his fingers fumbling for the ladder. He darted a quick glance to right and left, knowing before he did so there was no other way out of the old shed. He was completely trapped.

"I've got to kill you," Preston cried. "You could get me hanged!"

Hollis felt for his flashlight, swung it toward the ladder and flicked it on. The light showed him Mr. Preston's face, contorted with hate. The biology teacher was at the top of the wall, ready to swing his leg over the edge.

Hollis dropped the flashlight and swung with the shovel at Preston's head, feeling the shovel strike the climbing man in the chest. Preston screamed and fell from the ladder, jerking the shovel from Hollis McKeon's grasp. Now he had nothing to defend himself with.

He was swaying dazedly when a voice he recognized rang out sharply in the darkness. "Preston! Come down from there!"

Hollis felt weak, his strength draining away as he sank back into the damp sawdust.

"Stand there against that wall," he heard Joe Scott saying. "Come on in, Thad. You hear all you need to hear?"

"I sure did," Thad Wallace said. "Put the cuffs on him, Joe."

Hollis heard the metallic click of the handcuffs, then Joe's voice saying: "Come on down, Boy."

He pushed himself to his feet and staggered toward the wall. He could see Mr. Preston against the wall, the handcuffs glistening in the light from Thad Wallace's flashlight. He began to tremble, his teeth chattering as Joe helped him down the ladder.

"I never figured you for no liar," Joe Scott was saying, one arm draped over his shoulder in the police car. "So I kept an eye on Preston. When he came out to his car, I tailed him. I guess he figured he better drive out here and kind of check on things. Then, when he spotted your bike, he knew he had to kill you too, or it would be the end of the trail for him."

Hollis shuddered. "She's up there, Joe. Miss Jarrett—"

"Now, now," Joe soothed. "Take it easy, Boy. There's nothing we can do for her now except give her a fine funeral. You got the man that killed her."

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A CASE OF THE JIMJAMS

A Hard-Hitting Crime Novelet

by Fulton T. Grant

I'M WRITING this from a hospital bed. I've been lying here telling myself that a lot of this came about because I didn't have brains enough to figure a man right. He was the owner of the only service station in Triangle Lake, and I certainly figured him exactly one hundred percent wrong.

He was big and heavy and moon-faced. His long body and short legs made him look out-of-drawing. He had sleepy, washed-out eyes that didn't look as though he had brains enough to shut them in a dust-storm, and maybe it was the eyes that fooled me.

But if all that wasn't enough to label him, there was his sign. He had printed it in big black letters over the door of his service shack, JAMES A. JAMBE, PETROLATOR.

Now I ask you—*petrolator!* Seeing me grinning at it he said, "That's Mary's idea. Mary's my wife. She runs the diner next door. She says that sign gives 'em something to remember the place by."

I had come up to Triangle Lake with a job to do. I needed information, and I figured a joker like Jimjam with a name like that would know everybody's business and would be only too glad to spill all he knew. My mistake, entirely.

"By the way, Jim," I said, "I wonder if you ever heard of a guy up here named Tallant. City man. Plenty money. He's taken a house on the lake for the season, so I hear, and—"

Then came my first shock.

"You mean Mr. Freeman Tal-

© 1942, by Short Stories Magazine

Investigating a counterfeiting ring for the Treasury Department can be five ways dangerous . . . when you're a well-known newspaper columnist.

lant, don't you, Mr. Getty?" came Jimjam's crack. "He's the feller you wrote all them articles about in your paper, ain't he? You made him out a crook or something, didn't you? Are you up here after another story?"

I didn't like that. How did this hick get my name? I was carrying papers to identify me as John Hently Smythe, traveling salesman. I was fool enough to ask him how come, too, and he had all the answers.

"Why, that's pretty easy, Mr. Getty," he said. "I read your column in the *Examiner* every day—we get it a day late up here—and they always print your picture right at the top of your column, don't they?"

So he had me. Right then I regretted that the *Examiner's* circulation department had been so active getting distribution in the sticks. There were plenty of reasons why I preferred to pass for Smythe instead of Getty up here at Triangle Lake. Not the least of which was that I sort of wanted to stay alive and do my job. If Freeman Tallant or any of his mob knew I was hanging around Triangle Lake, the chances are you'd read about my sudden demise in the obit columns one of these days.

So off come the false whiskers. "Well," I told him lamely, "don't spread it around that you saw me up here because I'm on vacation. Even the office doesn't know where I am."

Which was a lie because I wasn't on the staff of the *Examiner* any more, as of just twelve hours before I got to Triangle Lake. Only the public didn't know that yet. The job I had wasn't a newspaper job at all. I was washed up as a columnist, and was working for the United States Government instead.

Possibly you've read my articles in which I tried my best to point out that Tallant, the high-hat society lawyer who married into one of our best families and wangled his way into the legal confidence of our biggest industrialists—was a crook, a racketeer and a Number One menace to the country at large.

I tried my best but I made a flop of it. Tallant was too tough for me. All I succeeded in doing was to get the boys of the Internal Revenue Department interested in Tallant's income taxes. They investigated him, hauled him up for trial on a tax-evasion charge—and couldn't make the charges stick. Tallant was too smart.

Result: my paper lost confidence in me and I lost a job. Tallant sued the *Examiner* for libel and won. Since I was the bright young man who brought on the suit, I got the axe.

Nevertheless I knew Tallant was a crook for all that and you couldn't make me swallow my

words. The only trouble is that it took more than a newspaper man with a hunch to prove it.

Tallant was something very special. He was more than smart: he was a genius. Using a very excellent law practice as a cover, catering to high society, getting himself married to Edwina Longvail of the filthy-rich Longvails and thereby acquiring a couple of millions he didn't really need, Tallant worked the most subtle system of rackets this country has ever seen. He was the mastermind of an organization that would make some of our big industrial corporations look like pikers.

But never mind all that now. I just told you that I was fired from the *Examiner* and that's true. After a very smoky session with the Old Man my contract was declared null and void as of August 1, but for reasons of expediency it was decided not to make much stir about it. The public needn't know. My column, "The Periscope" would just cease to appear, and that was all.

But the latter part of July I got a letter from Uncle Sam. The note was from the U.S. Treasury Department, asking me to call at an office in New York on a matter of considerable importance. I met a keen, sharp-faced chap who proved to be the head of the operatives working under cover for the Department in and around New York.

"Getty," he said, "we've been reading your column—about this Tallant business, I mean. And even though you didn't have what it takes to land your fish we think you've got something. By the way, you're American born, are you not?"

I admitted the charge. I gave him a catalogue of my honorable forebears including General Chadwick of Civil War fame and Major Halcyon Getty who froze his feet with G. Washington at Valley Forge. He was not unduly impressed.

"The point is," he said, "we have learned by methods of our own that you are severing connections with the *Examiner*."

How could I deny it?

"And possibly you would be free to take on a little job?" I was so free it hurt right down to the lining of my pocketbook.

"This job is for the Treasury Department, Getty. It won't pay much. It hasn't any glory in it. It's dangerous. But in a sense it is one of the most important jobs in the country. I'm going to offer it to you and hope you'll accept."

Then it came out. It seems that the Treasury agents had just turned up a scandal. They had found out that somebody had made counterfeits of the government bonds known as the Treasury Series M 3's. Not only had some crook duplicated the plates almost perfectly but they had an

organization which was substituting a lot of these phonies for the real bonds, all fifty or hundred dollar paper held by the small investors of the country.

"The thing is even more serious than it sounds," said the Treasury man, "because right now the government is selling bonds and if it ever should leak out that any bond issue had been counterfeited it would shake public confidence tremendously. Anything could happen. Therefore we aren't letting this story get into the press and I'm pledging you to absolute secrecy, Getty."

He paused an instant, then went on: "We have certain inconclusive indications that point to your old friend, Tallant. Nothing positive—call it a professional hunch. But you'll admit that if Freeman Tallant is even half the genius you think him, he'd be just the man to organize a racket like that, and big enough to put it over. Right?"

He was right on both counts. But I still didn't see my job, now that I'd left the paper.

"What we want," he said, "is a red herring. That is you. We can't do anything against Tallant if he even suspects that the Department has any ideas about him. He's too well protected. But if you can worry him—if you can dig up some personal scandal that looks like revenge for getting you off the *Examiner*, it would give our boys a chance to work on him while he is not looking. Is that clear?"

It was, in a way.

"We have learned that Tallant has taken the old mansion of the late Senator Hiram Styles up at Triangle Lake," he went on. "I want you to go up there and bother him. Keep him worried about Chad Getty while we follow our own leads. We'll finance it, and pay you a regulation salary, but we can't do it officially. You'll be on your own. We can't even stand behind you. Frankly, Getty, it's a lousy, thankless job. But I hope you'll take it.'

The rest of the interview isn't worth quoting. Nor was this a very hopeful beginning. I'd come up to the lake as Smythe, the salesman and right off the bat I'd got myself recognized as Getty by the first guy I ran into.

But there it was and I couldn't do much about it now, so I left my car to be greased and went next door to the diner for a coffee and a sandwich. And got my next shock immediately.

"How do you do, Mr. Getty?" chirruped the very attractive young woman behind the counter. "Jim just telephoned from next door and told me you'd be coming in. I hear you may be spending the summer up here. I know a nice little farmhouse on the lake where you can get a lovely room quite reasonably. It's run by a sweet old

lady, Mrs. Waters. I'll telephone and ask her to hold a room for you if you care to. It's really quite nice and picturesque—just below the old Senator Styles place, you know."

Now fancy that! And what made it more uncomfortable still was that there was somebody else in the lunchroom at the time, a dame with bright red hair and more physical attractiveness than she needed to make a man notice her.

She sat there sipping coffee at a table, however, and didn't pay any attention to me. I thought it best to accept Mrs. Jambe's solicitude as well-meant and let her call the Waters place.

The farmhouse was right by the lake side and Old Mrs. Waters was a darling in her late sixties who was brimming over with local gossip. She made me sit down on the porch and eat a piece of apple pie while a man took my bags upstairs to my room. I guess I was out there for twenty minutes or so when the old lady came toddling out again with more disturbing news.

"They's a lady to see you, Mr. Smythe. She's waitin' in the upstairs settin' room. And by the way, your own room is right across the hall. Here's the key, Mr. Smythe."

Now that was queer. In the first place I didn't know any dames who would follow me up into Triangle Lake and in the second, I certainly didn't know any who knew me as John Smythe. Outside of the Treasury Department and the Jimjams nobody in the world, so far as I knew, had ever even heard of John Hently Smythe. There was something screwy and I ought to have known better than to go and investigate.

But I went up. I was cagey enough to think I might better go straight into my own room first and then peek out of the door and try to catch a look at my visitor before I actually met her. I got my door open just far enough to see the awful striped wallpaper and the picture of Teddy Roosevelt over the commode, when something crashed against the back of my head and I passed out cold.

When finally my eyes opened again and the black cloud lifted, I was in my room on my bed and somebody was sitting beside me.

"Hello, Mr. Getty," a voice said. "Feel better?"

What jarred me back into complete consciousness was the sound of that voice. It was the voice of James A. Jambe, petrolator. I guess I was profane. I dislike being clobbered on the head and I said so with some heat.

"But I didn't hit you, Mr. Getty. I just come up to see if you was comfortable in the place Mary sent you to and I knew Mrs. Waters wouldn't mind if I went

straight up to your room. So I did. And there you were lying on the floor right in front of the door. I picked you up and carried you in."

"There was a woman asking for me. Did you see her?"

"Come to think of it I did see somebody on the stairs. I figured she was one of the new boarders. All I noticed was she had red hair. But a lady wouldn't of hit you, Mr. Getty."

"Maybe," I said, "she wasn't a lady."

Jimjam left me pretty soon, promising not to spread the story all over town—not that I trusted him—and I worked on the bump I had on my head with applications of hot and cold water. From the look of it I was pretty sure I'd been hit with a blackjack.

There were no more developments that day, but I stayed in my room and didn't even come down to dinner.

II

I SPENT THE forenoon making the name of Smythe known in Triangle Lake. I opened a bank account. I went to all the stores—both of them! I even dropped into the bar at the Triangle Lake Hotel wondering if I'd see Freeman Tallant and if he would know me and start worrying. But he didn't come in.

I bought some cards at the post office and rented a box. On my way back to the house things happened.

I know the sound of a bullet

which pings and misses and this one did both. It clipped leaves from the trees right over my head. Instinctively I threw myself flat on my stomach on the dirt sidewalk. The shot must have been fired from a silenced rifle. It had been a close thing.

When I got to the Waters house I got into my car and decided to take a run down the state road and find a friendly roadhouse where I could get a drink to clear my head. Being shot at by a silenced gun was not my idea of fun.

When I passed Jimjam's gas station I noticed a long, lean blue convertible coupe standing there getting gas—a foreign car, I thought, maybe an Isvesta-Bianchini—and sitting in the car was a very striking young woman. Very striking indeed. But it wasn't her beauty that made me notice her. It was her red hair and the fact that I knew her at sight.

It was the same redhead who had been sitting in Mrs. Jimjam's diner the day I arrived. And probably, I thought, it was the same lady visitor who had bopped me on the head when I went upstairs into the Waters place. Could it also be, I wondered, the same person who had shot at me just now? About the only place a bullet could have come from, I realized, was somewhere near Jimjam's gas station.

So I stepped on the gas and made for the state road as fast as my little car could travel.

Next thing I knew I could see that blue car in my rear-vision mirror. It was gaining on me so fast you'd think I was standing still. She could drive, that redhead.

I got into the state road before she did. She overhauled me, passed me and slammed on the brakes right ahead of me, making me nearly go through my own windshield when I braked just as abruptly, throwing the car to the side of the road. I expected to see a gun in her hand when her door opened and I was figuring my chances of diving into the roadside bushes.

But it didn't work out that way.

"Mr. Chad Getty?"

The voice had silver in it—maybe silver nitrate. She was standing on her running board looking straight at me. She was undeniably beautiful, with a full-lipped, high cheek-boned face of slightly petulant cast and lustrous dark eyes that contrasted strikingly with her flaming red hair. I guessed she was twenty-five or so, but she might have been older.

She didn't wait for me to answer. "Come over here, if you please, Mr. Getty," she said. And there was a quality in that voice that made me obey like a toy poodle.

So I went over. And got my next shock of the day.

Because sitting right alongside of this redhead was the awkward, ungainly, incongruous body and cheese face of Mr. James A. Jambe, petrolator of Triangle Lake.

"Hi, Mr. Getty," he said. "This is Mrs. Tallant. She asked me to come along with her. She said she wants to talk to you."

Once again I couldn't say a word before I was interrupted. Mrs. Tallant broke in on my "Howdedo" with, "You will take Mr. Getty's car back to his residence, James. Mr. Getty, you will please come with me."

Just like that. And believe it or not, I climbed into that big blue Isvesta without a protest, while Jimjam climbed out the other side and went over to my car.

But the spell of magic she had on me didn't last long. I don't push around easy, not even when a pretty woman is using her charm as a weapon.

I got in beside her and said, "Am I supposed to know what this is all about, Mrs. Tallant?"

She didn't answer. All she did was to step on the gas and shoot that Isvesta away from there so fast it burned the tires. We were moving down the state road hell bent. I sat there watching the speedometer climb up into the nineties.

The redhead at my side never said a word nor looked at me. Her face was set hard like a woman determined to do something she didn't like. I didn't like it much either.

"Wouldn't it be just as much fun," I said, "getting wherever we're going a little slower but all in one piece?

Even then she didn't really answer. She only spat the word, "Damn!" And stepped her foot hard on the brake pedal.

Now you just can't brake a car doing ninety miles an hour. Not unless staying alive has ceased to have any appeal for you. As I look back on it I think she didn't mean to step on the brake. I think she was mad and meant to stamp her little foot and didn't realize she'd hit the brake.

But the Isvesta didn't know about that. The Isvesta behaved as you would expect. It started to edge sideways. In a fraction of a second I knew we were going to go into a skidding crabslide unless a miracle happened. We'd be scattered all over half of Connecticut, a most unpleasant anticipation—not that I have anything against Connecticut. So I guess it was instinct that made me act.

I slammed red-headed Mrs. T. with my left elbow as I grabbed the wheel out of her hands. I slammed her hard, took the wheel and began fighting it. Probably that elbow slam made her relax pressure on the brake. Anyhow the car suddenly straightened out

a little and I was able to pull her down to a more normal speed.

"Lady," I said, so choked with rage I could hardly get the words out. "There are men who would have hauled off and knocked you down for pulling a stunt like that. Men who wouldn't dream of manhandling a woman ordinarily."

I'll say this for her. Her control was superb. "I saw no other way," she said.

"Way to what?"

"To stop you from persecuting my husband. To get you away from here. Does that answer you, Mr. Newspaperman?"

That held me for seconds. It made a kind of sense but not a very clear kind. This was Mrs. Freeman Tallant, wife of the man I had been sent up here to badger while the Treasury agents did their stuff. Naturally she wouldn't want me around messing up life for her dear beloved crook of a husband and just as naturally she might try even a dramatic way to get me out of the region. *If* she knew that I had been sent.

But she didn't. She couldn't. Nobody knew why I was there. Nobody knew even that I wasn't working for the *Examiner* any more. My column was being run by a pro term editor for a couple of weeks while I was supposed to be on my vacation and then they would just let it peter out gradually to avoid the appearance of admitting that the paper had been in a stew over the Tallant business. The cover-up had been worked out to cover every contingency.

Yet here was Mrs. Tallant, the former Edwina Longvail, trying to crash me into a ditch at ninety. There was a certain ambiguity about that which intrigued me some. And also it made me angry.

So I asked her some more questions.

Was she, I wanted to know, also the dame who had come to visit me at the Waters' place and had smacked me down with a blackjack? Was she the one who had taken a potshot at me with a silenced rifle just a while ago?

And I was in for another surprise.

"I have no idea," she said, "what you're talking about. I was not even aware that you were in Triangle Lake until I saw you at the diner. I recognized you from your picture in the *Examiner,* naturally, and James tried to keep me from making certain. Of course he knew. I dare say you have bribed him to keep still.

"However I am not a woman who doesn't know her own mind, Mr. Getty. I was determined to overtake you. I had no definite plan but it was unavoidable that I make some effort to keep you from troubling Freeman. I acted on impulse in a sense but the purpose was quite definite."

"Just impulse," I said, "trying to crash us both at high speed?

You must want to get rid of me pretty bad, Mrs. Tallant."

"Is it money you want," she said. "Or do you get some strange sadistic pleasure out of defaming a man like my husband?"

"Listen, Mrs. Tallant," I told her, "did it ever occur to you that maybe I wrote my column in good faith? That I might even really think that your husband was a crook?"

I expected she'd flare up at that, but she fooled me.

She said very quietly, "Naturally not."

Well, that sort of took the bit out of my teeth. I didn't quite know what to say next. And the thing I did was part reflex and part frustrated anger. I gave a big heave and squashed the lady, most impolitely, over into her corner of the seat. I jabbed the starter button and slipped the Isvesta in gear. I jammed on the pedal and spun her around with a scream of rubber and pointed her back toward Triangle Lake.

Anyhow my being suddenly rough and the jerk of the car sort of scared Mrs. T. or anyhow it kept her quiet until I had worked up speed, which didn't take long in that bus.

I decided that since it was my job to get into Tallant's hair I would start in doing it. To hell with J. H. Smythe, I would be Chad Getty now since everybody and his wife seemed to know me anyhow. I would drive Mrs. T. right into her own front yard.

III

WE PASSED THE service station fast and I was mildly amused to see the expression on the face of Jimjam when he looked up from behind a car he was servicing to see us whirling up the road.

The old Hiram Styles place which Tallant had leased out here was a very grandiose monstrosity but a monstrosity nevertheless. On the French Riviera it might have gotten by for a hotel or a West German banker's resort house. But up in the green hills of New England it was just an eyesore.

As we approached the place, I noticed a lot of playboy-types in golfer's tweeds spotted the landscape on one side and a handful more were dashing about on polo ponies on the other. Below the tennis courts was a hundred-foot marble pool where a young athlete in navy-blue bathing trunks stood on a highdive flexing his muscles and a group of other bathers stood below to watch him.

Puzzle number one turned up just as we entered the driveway. It was a whistle, long, shrill and loud. I couldn't say just where it came from on account of the weird accoustics of the place and naturally I didn't know what it meant exactly. But I did see the result of it directly.

Abruptly everything stopped.

The tennis doubles stopped like they had been paralyzed. Polo ponies plowed the turf with their braking hooves. Golfers forgot to swing. Muscles on the high dive went kerplunk into the water, but his admirers on the sidelines didn't even notice it because they were scrambling to their feet. You'd think it was Army and somebody had yelled, "Attention!"

And I thought—I wasn't really sure, of course—that I heard Mrs. Tallant suck in her breath when that whistle blew and felt her go rigid.

Under the porte-cochere I couldn't see anything but the golf course and not much of that, but I could hear. And I heard the thin roaring of an airplane motor—saw it was a helicopter. So did Mrs. Tallant, I guess, because she seemed to forget that I had practically kidnaped her and had treated her pretty roughly back there.

She said, very ungently, "Hurry, please, Mr. Getty."

I caught on a little when she opened the car door and stepped out. She was watching the helicopter slip down and land prettily on the golf course. It would be Tallant himself, I thought, and it was perhaps natural that she didn't want to be caught riding in a car with me.

But it wasn't Tallant. Not by a whole lot.

"So sorry," said the precious redhead, "you can't stay and have a dip with us, Mr. Getty. I'll have you driven home."

And before I could make any answer she had skipped out across the drive, up onto the porch and had dashed into the door.

I was plenty puzzled. However, I decided that I wanted to stay and find out, and so I fixed it so that nobody would be able to

drive me home for a bit anyhow. I reached under the dashboard and felt a lot of wires. I grabbed a handful of these and yanked. Something gave. Then I sat back and waited to see what came along, feeling pretty sure I had wrecked the ignition system.

It was about then that I noticed what was going on all over the place. A man had got out of the helicopter and a lot of the golfers and polo players had come running up to crowd around him. Also the tennis players and the swimming Ivy League lads had started moving in the direction of the helicopter. And I saw that the whole mob were falling in alongside of and behind the man and were all marching straight toward the front of the house—in other words toward me.

Then Mrs. T. appeared again bringing a tall, husky young man in tow. He wore a sort of flunky's uniform but he didn't look like a flunky. Before I had figured much further on this score, Mrs. Tallant said, "Forrest, this is Mr. Chad Getty. I wish you would drive him to his house at once, please."

And this butler, flunky, or whatever said, "Sure thing, ma'm. Right away." And he climbed into the car and slid under the wheel.

Now flunkies and domestic servants don't say, "Sure thing, ma'm," or else the movies have got it all wrong. But things were creeping up on me so fast now that I didn't have time to speculate much about him then.

I lighted a cigarette and sat back while he thumbed the starter. Nothing happened. He tried again with same result. Then he said to her, "Any trouble with this car, Miz Tallant?"

She shook her head. She wasn't looking at him. Instead she was looking at the crowd coming out of the golf course, and Forrest started to swear under his breath as he climbed out and lifted the hood. I sat tight.

The man from the helicopter and the sports youths were pretty close now and Mrs. T. was tapping her foot impatiently.

"What can be wrong with it?" she demanded querulously. "It was in perfect condition until just now."

This Forrest knew cars. He fished a screwdriver out of his pocket and bridged the starter contacts and turned the bus over. Still it didn't take. Then he answered her.

"There's a break in the ignition wires," he said, and I had a hunch he gave me a funny look.

Mrs. Tallant didn't hear him or wasn't interested now. She took a step toward the door and would have got inside in another moment only a voice called out from behind me somewhere, "Hiya, Mrs. Tallant? Some trouble?"

It was the man from the helicopter. I got a pretty good look at

him as he came around the corner of the house with twenty or more college boys in tow. I recognized that face of his and it made me both unhappy and startled. Because the guy was a man who had been reported dead six months ago.

Sure I knew him and I saw that he knew me, too. His name was Fritz Bezon, alias Fred Bessom, alias Dr. Frederic Bessing, alias this and that and a lot more aliases that filled a big part of the record books for the F.B.I. and sundry other police organizations all over the country. Fritz Bezon, the smartest, cleverest, copperplate engraver that ever went crooked, had been rounded up a couple of years earlier for making pretty imitations of the new twenty-dollar bills and passing them around freely.

He had done time in Atlanta on this charge, had tried to escape in a prison break and had been reported killed in the attempt. I don't believe there is a newspaper man in the country who wouldn't have recognized Bezon no matter how he disguised himself, because he made one of the best stories the press had carried in a long time and because he was not only photogenic but swaggeringly liked to have his picture taken by the cameramen.

And now, six months after he was reported dead, here was Fritz Bezon dropping out of heaven in a helicopter on the summer property of Freeman Tallant. Taking that fact along with what the Treasury man had told me, it could only tie up with Tallant in one way. And that's the way I took it.

But Bezon saw me and knew me right away.

"Hold on a minute," he said, perhaps to Forrest, perhaps to Mrs. Tallant who was turning toward the door. "Who's this gentleman in the car? It wouldn't be Chad Getty, would it? You ought to be more careful of your friends, Mrs. Tallant. This lad is bad news any time, any place. Especially since I'm sure he recognizes me."

Mrs. Tallant opened her mouth to answer, thought better of it, and went straight into the house, closing the door with a slam. Bezon didn't seem to care.

"You aren't taking Mr. Getty any place, Forrest," he said. "He stays here. We got a very nice special room for Mr. Getty, haven't we, boys? Nice and cool down there. Good for high blood-pressure. All right, some of you, take him down there and treat him special. Get going."

They got going. They caught me by surprise, too. They swarmed over the car, jerked me out of it and had me half marching, half dragged around the corner of the house before I could catch my breath. They weren't very gentle

about it, either. Not for college boys.

And then suddenly I caught on. They weren't college boys. They only dressed that way.

One of the so-called golfers swung on my shin with a mashie shot that you won't find in the handbooks. I was down on one knee in a split second and a dozen pairs of hands lifted me clean off the ground and carried me. Also somebody took pains to tap me on the head with something hard.

After that it was all a little vague although I seem to remember being tossed or falling down a flight of very hard unfriendly stairs and landing on something that might have been cold earth.

IV

IT WAS THE feel of cold water that woke me up. My right arm and half of my white Palm Beach suit was in a bath of mud. I couldn't see it because there wasn't any light, but I could feel it. What's more I could *smell* it, and it wasn't attar of roses, either.

I managed to sit up, although my head pinwheeled, and fumble in my pockets for matches. About six slim little paper matches were still attached to a cardboard book that had been squashed into a roll inside my pipe pocket.

I struck one and held the flame steady. It lit up most of the cellar. The root-cellar was walled by wooden planks on two sides, but a drainpipe came through at a corner and was leaking rather badly. This accounted for the dirty puddle in the middle of the floor which I had rolled in, and also for the smell.

But what a second match revealed for me was that the constant leakage had rotted the planking in that corner, so that there was a slim chance I might be able to break away the rotten wood and make a place big enough for me to squeeze through.

It was a messy job and a nasty one. I had to kneel in the mud and dig with my hands at the ends of plank buried in the dirt floor, now all muddy. But after a while I got my fingers on an end, and started pulling. The plank gave. I pulled a chunk of rotten wood away that left an opening about two feet high but too narrow to squeeze through.

However, some more work in the muck gave me more broken plank and a hole that a man my size could get through if he were not squeamish. I wasn't. Next, after plowing my face and body into the mud and squirming like a worm, I was out in the other, dryer part of a very large cellar. And in the pitch dark.

I froze when I heard footsteps and voices right overhead. But they didn't come any nearer, and finally I figured out that they were upstairs in a room overhead and

that they had come down through a staircase.

I started feeling for the stairs. I didn't find them. I found a lot of other things, though. I ran headfirst into a furnace and bumped my head. Then I hit a stone wall. And it was when I was feeling around this wall up high that I found a window. It took me all of ten minutes to figure out why there wasn't any light in it. It was simply dark outside because night had fallen.

I got the window open—one of those long narrow cellar windows that you just fasten with a hook—and had just about heaved my body up and over the sill with my head partly out of doors, when a door opened somewhere and light poured into that cellar.

Nobody ever got through a cramped impossible opening quite as fast as I went through that window.

And found myself in prison.

I was in a little low enclosure out of doors with a strong wooden ceiling overhead and what looked like grated bars all around me. It turned out to be a lattice of wood and not bars but it was just as confining. And I heard voices down in the cellar behind where I had come from, too. Voices I knew and recognized.

The first voice was Fritz Bezon. He was saying, "What the hell, why don't we just let him rot there? It'll take a long time before anybody misses him and he isn't using his own name up here."

And the other voice was that of nobody else in the world but Mr. James A. Jambe, gas monkey at Triangle Lake crossroads. He was saying, "I have a hunch, that's all. You never know about these here old houses. If he should get away he'd—"

And that was all I heard.

Jimjam! Well, that fixed that problem in my mind. If James Jambe, Esq., was down in the cellar with Fritz Bezon it didn't leave much doubt about where he stood. Like a sap I had walked right into Tallant's hands, getting myself recognized at the gas station.

Most likely that was just what Jimjam's job was, keeping a lookout for the wrong people coming to the right place. Probably he had socked me on the head, too, and was afraid to do another job for fear of being caught. Obviously he had told Mrs. Tallant that I was in town and had had one of these "college boys" take a potshot at me from somewhere. A real nice collection of people.

I was lucky. Just about the time the voices trailed off I leaned against a small door in the lattice. It came to me that I was underneath a small back porch latticed in and used to keep lawnmowers and such out of the rain. Anyhow here was a door, just big enough for a lawnmower—or me—to get

through, and so I pushed it open gingerly and started out.

And stopped when I almost ran headfirst into the stern of a "college boy" who was out there standing guard.

Now maybe I should have gone back into my hole and figured out a plan of action—but I didn't have time. Right then there was a hell of a shouting from the cellar behind me and I knew what it meant. The collegiate guard also heard it and turned around. He couldn't miss seeing me because I had my head right out into the glare of a shaft of light coming from a window.

So I jumped him. I had no choice. I jumped him, using my head as a ram and it caught him in the pit of the stomach. He made a soft noise like *ungg,* and then didn't make any more because I hit him flush on the jaw. Lucky again. That sock hit the button and he went out. I caught him and dragged him out of the light, praying that nobody would look out just then.

Nobody did but somebody was coming around the wing of the house yelling, "Hey, Duke, what goes on here?"

I didn't wait. I did the only thing I could. I went up the short stairs over the latticed porch and right into the house. I did not think they'd ever look for me right in the lion's den.

The back door led into a kitchen, very nice and expensive, but so bright that a very small-sized mouse couldn't have hidden in it. I dashed through the only door I could see and found myself in a short hall with a staircase going up from it. I went right on up the stairs.

A moment later I was passing through a library which gave into a small music room with a big concert grand piano half filling it. This place had cost money. Mahogany panels, nicely sculptured. Sculptured friezes along the upper walls. And books, books, books, in bookcases that filled all the walls not paneled. I remember standing there and telling myself that it can't be very smart to be a newspaper man when politicians get to live like this.

And right then I heard the sound. Specifically, I heard the sound of a woman crying.

I didn't stop to think who it might be because Mrs. Tallant was distinctly the woman in the case and she was on my mind. I went foolishly looking for the weeping dame.

But she was not alone.

I stepped into that room—it was a nice little room all hung over with art that looked expensive—and there was the weeping lady, sitting in a chair because she couldn't get out of it. She was tied up securely with a double length of cord. There was a man tied up on a feminine divan alongside of

her but just out of her reach. The man was bleeding pretty badly from a big gash on his forehead but it didn't take me too long to recognize him.

It was Freeman Tallant.

And the woman herself was Mrs. Tallant. Only she wasn't. She had the features of Mrs. Tallant, the same red hair and even the same costume as the woman who had tried to murder me in the Isvesta earlier in the day. But she was not the same woman. She was younger. She was lovelier. Not better looking but *nicer* looking.

When she looked up from her crying and saw me she stifled a scream. She put her hands up as far as the ropes would let her and said in a hoarse whisper, "Don't —Oh, don't hit him any more."

That made Tallant work one eye open, which must have been hard because they were both pretty well stuck up with blood. I don't know just what he expected to see but certainly it wasn't me. He didn't say a word for an instant.

There was no doubt about the surprise in his voice when he said, half in a whisper, "Getty!" And that was all.

Just as he managed to get my name out like that I heard a slamming door and a lot of heavy footsteps running on the stairs and I knew that things were getting down to split seconds. So I acted. I didn't stop to figure it out beyond the fact that Tallant was tied up and hurt in his own house which indicated that things were not exactly as I had thought them.

There was a paper knife on a table across the room. It wasn't very sharp but it was good enough to wear away the strands of thin quarter inch Manila that had Tallant tied to the couch, and we both of us managed to slip the lady's ropes before the footsteps were pounding down the hall.

Then Tallant said, looking at my filthy, muddy clothes, "So you aren't with them?"

I shook my head.

"Then hurry," he said, and we both followed him.

There was a door hidden behind a big tapestry. The door led into a bathroom which had another door which led into a woman's bedroom. Tallant led the way in a hurry and we both ran through. He had just gone through another door followed by the woman when something caught my eye.

It was a glint of red hair. The head which it belonged to was on the floor behind a short Japanese screen across the bed. I could barely see it. It was the merest chance that I happened to notice it. I stopped to investigate.

And what I found there was a dead woman.

It was the woman who, only hours earlier, I had known as Mrs. Edwina Tallant, the one who had tried to kill me in a nice friendly way, the one who had ordered her chauffeur Forrest to drive me home before she disappeared.

There were more shouts now and running and excitement through the partition and I ducked through the door where Tallant had gone—and found myself alone, lost and without any guide.

I was in a hall. There must have been a lot of them in that crazy house. Also there were lots of doors leading from it but one of them probably led to where those phony college boys were looking for me, even if another led to where Freeman Tallant—and the woman who looked like his wife—might be waiting.

The footsteps were coming nearer and I didn't have much chance to guess. I took the nearest one. It was the right one and the wrong one too.

Freeman Tallant, looking very bloody and very determined stood facing me and the redhead stood behind him. But the big point is that Tallant had a gun and the gun was aimed for my middle. I stopped dead as soon as the door closed.

"I'd hate," he said. "To have to use this, but I will if I must. Keep your hands in the air and keep ahead of me. Follow Miss Longvail—"

I stuck the hands up and nodded. So this was a Miss Longvail and not Edwina? I followed her.

Tallant said warningly, "Go right ahead, Cecie. But be careful. We've got to watch him every minute."

Cecie! Now somewhere in the back of my head was the name Cecile Longvail. I half-remembered that she had been a pretty deb not many years ago and that she had been bridesmaid at the Tallant wedding. But just why she should be with Tallant instead of his wife wasn't clear—except that

I'd seen his wife lying dead just now, and I had a hunch he didn't know it.

Well, it wasn't the time nor place to discuss such matters so I followed Cecie. The gun followed me.

V

WE TURNED LEFT and proceeded along the hallway until we came in another room—small and blank-walled. We entered it.

"Sit down Cecie, you're all in," said Tallant. "And now, Getty talk fast."

I didn't need a diagram to know what he meant. I kept nothing back. I admitted that I was up there to get something on him. I admitted a lot but I didn't mention the Treasury Department nor the faked bonds. Already I had a hunch that Tallant had got into a row with Fritz Bezon, but I didn't know where he stood and I wasn't going to spill too much.

He grinned and lowered his gun. It was a bitter grin.

"Getty," he said, "you're a fool. Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that I were just as much of a crook as you have been calling me for six months. How long do you think you'd be alive?"

"You hold the aces, Tallant," I said.

"I am quite aware of that. So you knew Bezon, did you?"

"Obviously."

"And you know his record?"

"Why not? I'm a newspaper man."

"And you are on the point of breaking away if you can and spilling quite a story to the press and probably also to the police?"

"I can't," I said, "argue with a gun."

He looked over at Cecie Longvail and I thought I saw him smile. The young woman didn't smile. She only said, "What are we going to do, Freeman?"

He didn't answer her. He spoke to me. He said, "Getty, there is a telephone in that old roll-top desk. It has not been used since Senator Styles died. I imagine he used it in connection with some of his—ah—political work. Will you kindly use it and telephone the police. I'd appreciate it."

I was so startled I could only stare.

He nodded. "Go ahead," he said. "Call them and call your paper, if you like. This is going to be a scoop. I might as well make a clean breast of it now as any other time."

In a daze I found the phone, brushed off the dust and put in a call for the nearest state trooper headquarters. Before the call went through, though, Tallant said, "I'll take the phone if you please, Getty."

I handed the instrument to him.

"Hello?" he said, the instant he pressed the receiver to his ear.

"This is Freeman Tallant. . . . That's right, Tallant. I'm up in the old Styles' place at Triangle Lake. I've taken it for the summer. Yes, I supposed you knew it. Will you send a strong patrol here at once to arrest one of the most dangerous crooks in the country? It's Fred Bezon, late of Atlanta penitentiary, who was reported dead. He is not only alive but here at my house with a considerable gang. You may find a murder on your hands when you get here. Make it fast, if you please."

Then he turned to me. "Satisfied?" he said.

I said, "Maybe," and added something to the effect that he hadn't named all the crooks in this house and that as to murder it had already happened. That got him. I wished immediately that I hadn't said it.

"What murder?" he demanded.

I had to tell him what I had seen in the bedroom. It doesn't make anybody feel good to tell a man that his wife is dead.

Cecie Longvail gasped and said, "Oh, my God! Freeman—"

I had a hunch, born right then, that she knew something about that dead sister of hers and that maybe Tallant had killed her.

As to Tallant, he seemed shaken enough. "If you are not mistaken, this is—horrible. But it may be the happiest way out for her. Poor Edwina! God knows I've warned her, I've tried my best."

The Longvail girl was crying again and that put me off guard for a moment. It was pretty stupid of me but I said, "Then you expected Mrs. Tallant to—die?"

It didn't faze him.

"No, not quite that, Getty, but I was aware that it could end that way. I didn't think—"

I certainly wasn't expecting him to break. But he did. He slumped onto the old table, holding his head in his hands and groaning like a sick man.

"I can't go through with it, Cecie," he finally said. "You tell him. God knows I've lived with it for years, fighting it, covering it up and even selling what's left of my own self-respect to keep her out of trouble. But I can't face it now. I'm afraid, Cecie. You tell him. Spare me this last humiliation—"

And then I knew I had something. I knew it was big but I didn't know what it was. I had a quick picture of a love-affair between the younger Longvail girl and her sister's husband. My hunch that he or she or they together had murdered Mrs. Tallant got stronger. Naturally I didn't quite know how Fritz Bezon and his crowd came into it nor why Tallant had been tied up and beaten but I had a pretty ugly picture in my mind.

But then Cecie started to talk and the picture changed. I began to be ashamed of myself.

"Mr. Getty," she said, fighting

her tears. "Everything you wrote about the crooked organization called Universal Enterprises was true. But what you didn't know is that, although Freeman lent his name to the operation as president, he was not really responsible for its activities. Freeman is not the kind of man you thought him. The criminal was my sister, Edwina."

Even if she had stopped right there it would have been enough, I think, to give me most of the answers. She went on, however. She told me that her sister, Edwina, had been a problem child. She had been unruly, dishonest, mean, selfish and generally evil. When Edwina was fourteen she had run away with the family chauffeur, Fritz Bezon.

That was a dozen years or so ago. The Longvail family managed to hush it up somehow and they paid off Bezon to stay away and let her alone. With this hush money Bezon seems to have got capital enough to launch his counterfeiting schemes. An excellent mechanic anyhow, he soon became a skilled copper-plate man, a real artist. He might have gone to a considerable success legitimately in this profession had he not been warped and instinctively crooked, but instead he preferred easy money and went at it in a way that landed him in Atlanta.

"If you will look up the dates," said Cecie, "you'll see that Edwina married Freeman only a month after Fritz went to prison. Father thought the world of Freeman and hoped that Edwina's association with such a man would destroy all her pathological troubles. But it didn't. She had her own money, you know, and she used it to finance several crooked enterprises. She was smart, a criminal genius. I think she was more than a match for most men."

"Believe me," Tallant broke in, "she was bewildering, Getty. I was a child beside her—"

And Cecie took it up again. "I think Fritz must have given her the first idea of a holding company to cover a lot of borderline enterprises operating all over the country. Fritz had a tremendous influence with her. We learned later that he didn't keep his word about not seeing her and that they used to meet regularly. And when Freeman, to please Edwina, bought stock in her Universal Enterprises, he discovered the whole crooked set-up."

Freeman cried out suddenly. "No, Cecie! that isn't the complete truth. What's the use of pretending? It's the story we agreed to tell, but I'm not going through with it. The simple truth, Getty, is that I was weak. I began, true enough, by trying to shield my wife and to cover her up I lent my name to her organization. But I was weak. I like money, I was

born poor, and I have worked hard.

"When I saw these millions coming in, when I found that her schemes were almost impossible to detect, I allowed my weakness and greed to trip me up. I not only protected her but I also helped her. Substantially I was the crook that you have called me. Substantially I was worse, for I knew better. It was only when Bezon turned up that I began to have regrets. Jealousy, understand?

"I found out that Edwina had helped him escape and had actually sponsored a murder so that a body might be substituted for his. I found out that she was seeing him, that she loved him. I was jealous. Getty, I couldn't face it."

"Oh, Freeman!"

There was something tragic in the girl's voice. "Oh, *Freeman!* you told me—"

"I know, Cecie," he said. "And I'm more than sorry. I've led you to believe that I didn't love Edwina—that and much more, God forgive me. Even when I hated her I loved her. I lied to myself—and to you. I can never feel about any woman as I felt about Edwina."

Tallant hadn't finished. He turned to me, as if to avoid the look of tormented reproach in her eyes. "Listen carefully, Getty," he said. "Because here is an angle that even you hadn't thought of. It was when I learned what Mrs. Tallant and Bezon planned, that I couldn't make myself go on. It was too ugly and hateful to me. Bezon was using the organization to counterfeit and distribute government bonds—"

He went into details then. It was the information I'd come to Triangle Lake hoping to secure, and it ended my job for the Treasury Department.

Not the least important of the workings of Universal Enterprises, he said, included small companies that specialized in family and household loans. These were perfectly legal firms, properly set up and in good standing with the S.E.C., their capital guaranteed by Universal Enterprises and in every way sound. These operated over small radiuses, catering each to a carefully chosen district.

"As a matter of fact," Tallant said, "the idea of these loan companies was originally my own. It was a feeble attempt to show Edwina that big money can be made legitimately. In a sense they were the only perfectly honest subsidiaries of the holding company—that is, until Bezon put them into his racket."

The general scheme was that these small loan companies made a specialty of accepting government bonds as loan collateral on a very generous basis. While these bonds were supposed to be in their vaults, they substituted the phony bonds of Fritz Bezon for the origi-

nals, selling the real ones in the market.

It was a complex setup. But if it worked out they would make millions, literally. Already they had experimented in several small regions and found that the substitutions could be made handily—or so they believed. It was clear that they didn't suspect that the Treasury Department was on to them and neither, I gathered, did Tallant.

I was tempted to give the show away for a moment, but I decided against it. After all, I was only a red-herring and not a Treasury man. It would have been overreaching my authority.

When Tallant learned of this bond business he reneged. It was more than he could stand. First he tried to talk his wife out of it and then he tried to gum the works by threatening to withdraw his own name from the company set-up and thus cause a general shake-up down the scale. It didn't work. It was then that Fritz Bezon moved in.

"I give the man credit," said the lawyer. "He was too quick and too smart for me. I allowed Edwina to sell me the idea of leasing this house. Personally I dislike the place but she overruled me. When I capitulated she came up here to open it a week ahead of me.

"When I finally got here I found the place overrun with guests—those muscle-men of Fritz Bezon's dressed as collegians. Also I found myself a prisoner in my own residence, with my own wife as my jailer. Had it not been for Miss Longvail I might not be alive now to tell you all this."

He didn't say specifically that he had run to Cecie when he saw that he had lost Edwina but it was pretty plain. Anyhow I could see that she loved Tallant, perhaps hopelessly. I gathered that Cecie had grown up in the habit of covering up her sister's misdoings for the sake of family pride and reputation, too. And I was pretty sure that Edwina didn't mind a bit if her lawyer husband, now backsliding, turned his attentions on her sister. Possibly she planned to use her to get a divorce later and actually marry Bezon.

I was even surer that neither Tallant nor Cecie had murdered Mrs. Tallant. The picture was beginning to fill out.

However, I didn't learn any more right at that moment, because something was happening outside. First there was shouting and then there was shooting. A machine-gun started chattering. Big-caliber pistols barked. Automobile sirens screamed. And I knew that the state troopers had come.

"This," I said to Tallant, "is your big chance to square everything. I'd rather see you do it than break such a story in the papers."

He gave me a queer look. "Thanks," he said. "I know what I have to do." Then to the girl, "I think it will be safe to leave here now, Cecie. I don't want you in this."

"But you said—"

"I know. I said that I loved Edwina. But I also said it wasn't a normal, transforming kind of love, but a disease. I had to tell you, Cecie. I had to make everything clear. I do love you, Cecie. I want to say that, too. Even with Mr. Getty here, I'm proud to say it. I only wish I deserved you. I only wish the past could be wiped out with—with a word."

"But Freeman!"

She had forgotten me. She was clinging to him and sobbing, and he was stroking her hair. I didn't want to spoil that moment for them, but the shooting outside made me realize that I had to hurry things up.

"Sorry," I said. "But we can't stay here—"

Tallant understood. He pushed her gently from him. "We must go, dear," he said. "This may be the only chance."

Cecie turned and preceded me out of the room, her face deathly pale. As we crept down the stairs. I noticed that Tallant had lingered behind and wasn't with us.

I started to turn back, then changed my mind. We had hardly reached the next landing when a loud explosion echoed through the house. It was a shot and I knew it. It was followed by a heavy thud.

Cecie screamed, as was to be expected, and we both ran back upstairs into the room we'd just left.

Let's omit the scene. It wasn't pretty. Freeman Tallant was sprawling over the only table in the room, a still smoking gun in his hand. His face was covered with blood.

Cecie threw herself on the body with a wild cry of despair.

VI

DOWNSTAIRS THE guns were still chattering. I turned and started toward the door, but I never reached it.

Fritz Bezon had come into the room and was aiming a gun at me. He pulled the trigger and shot me smack in the middle.

Was I hurt? What do you think? Fortunately the bullet hit a rib and turned away from my heart. At least, that's the story the medicos handed me later, and there must be some truth in it—because here I am able to sit up and write this without undue pain. But when that lead hit me it was as though somebody had clouted me with a sledge-hammer. It knocked me kicking. The floor just seemed to come up from behind me and smack me on the back of the neck, while my middle-man seemed to be squashed flat.

I didn't pass out cold, however —which was rather too bad. If I had I wouldn't have seen the rest of it, part of which was as ugly a sight as I ever want to witness.

Bezon didn't stop shooting with that one shot. He emptied the gun at the place where I'd been standing. If I hadn't been bowled over by the first slug the others would have finished me. I could see his hand jump as the gun banged. And when it clicked on an empty chamber, he flung it away and pulled another.

Cecie Longvail was screaming. Her mouth was open and she was holding her hand in front of her face in absolute horror. But as Bezon pulled his other gun and pointed it at her, there was the sound of still another gun barking behind him, and the vicious rat froze solid.

The light went out of his eyes. In slow motion I saw the gun drop from his hand and he fell stiff and sidewise like a movie dummy.

And then a man stepped through the doorway and stood there with a big forty-five smoking in his hand.

I knew the man. It was my friend the Treasury agent.

That was just about where I *did* pass out of the picture.

When I came around I was in a bed. I knew where I was. The odor of antiseptics told me it was a hospital, even if the ghosts in white

uniform standing around me didn't look like doctors.

Somebody said, "There he is. He'll make it."

Somebody else said, "Well, Getty, I see you intend to stay with us."

And a woman's voice said, "Oh —thank God!"

The third voice I knew pretty well by this time. It was the voice of Miss Cecie Longvail.

I managed to get the eyes open wide then. It was a little confusing because everybody was in disguise. They were all wearing white doctor's smocks, as though you had to dress up to visit a guy sick with a hole in his middle. But I could make out the faces in spite of the disguise.

You can most always tell a medico by his professional look. And certainly it was not a doctor but the Treasury man standing between Miss Longvail and a

round faced, moon-faced, cheese-faced individual who was somehow the last person in the world I expected to see at my bedside. Because he was James A. Jambe, petrolator, Jimjam to you, and for all I knew Fritz Bezon's righthand man.

It shocked me to see him and I tried to sit up and yell, "Catch that crook!" But I couldn't. The effort made me feel as though somebody were twisting a knife in me. It hurt. I guess all I did was groan. And it made me groan all the worse to notice that the Treasury man had his hand on Jimjam's shoulder as though they were both palsy-walsy.

I guess the Treasury man caught on a little, too, because he said, "Relax boy, and stop glaring at Jim Legge. He's the smartest operative we have in the service. Besides which you practically owe him your life."

"Howdy, Mr. Getty," said this Jimjam grinning. "You feeling better? Think I pass as a service station man?"

And one way or another the whole set-up came out.

It was this Jim Legge who had first uncovered the phony bonds and had recognized them as the handiwork of Fritz Bezon. Bezon was supposed to be dead but the F.B.I. had never been really satisfied with the identification of the body that was picked up after that jail-break, and so Legge reasoned that the counterfeiter must still be alive.

Next he dug up evidence that pointed to the Universal Enterprises being behind the pushing of the phony bonds. That is where the Tallant angle came in. Learning that Tallant had leased the old Styles' place, Legge rented that service station, changed his name and camped out as near to the Tallant house as possible. *Jambe*, you see, is the French for *Leg*, in case that helps anything.

"It was my idea," he told me, "for the Department to get you up to Triangle Lake as a decoy duck. The records showed that Bezon had once served as a chauffeur for the Longvails and that gave us a direct tie-in with Tallant. If you worked on Tallant, I figured, it was likely to turn up something or other, which it did—although not quite as I expected. But you survived it anyway."

Legge—or Jambe—had a fine working point in that service station. He recognized Bezon in Mrs. Tallant's car when they drove up that week ahead of Tallant and he let on that he was, himself, an ex-con going straight. Bezon did the rest. He sold the fake ex-con on joining his outfit promising him the moon gold-plated.

Jim was to act as a sort of lookout or advance guard in case the wrong people came to the Lake. Naturally I was the perfect setup of "wrong people." When I came

along he telephoned Mrs. Tallant. Hence all my troubles.

"I didn't know at the time that Mrs. T. and Bezon had had a quarrel and that she was trying to handle things on her own. She surprised me by turning up that afternoon and taking a shot at you from my service station and then pulling that hysterical trick of trying to do you in in the Isvesta. I guess she really loved her husband after all.

"Anyhow Bezon's strong men, the college boys, had given Tallant a bad going over and she knew Bezon would kill him if he had a chance. So she tried to step in and fix things her way. I had to stick to my role and play like I belonged, but I knew you'd be in a jam and I went to the house as soon as you drove by with the lady."

I remembered hearing Jimjam's voice arguing against letting me rot in the cellar.

"While all the trouble and hysterics came up after you knocked out that boy in front of the back door, I managed to get word through to the boss here and I knew the pay-off was just about due. Of course I didn't know that Tallant had phoned the state police then. That was just one of those things. The boss and our boys ran into the troopers besieging the house. I guess you know the rest."

But I didn't; not all of it.

"Well, I'm sort of sorry for Tallant," I said. "And especially for Miss Longvail. But I guess Tallant took the only way out. He was in a pretty bad spot, all in all."

There was a sudden, very queer silence after that. A voice from behind me broke it, though. It was a weak sort of a voice but there was a glad little note in it. It said, "Thank you, Getty. Fortunately my efforts at solving my bad spot didn't quite take."

Another voice, a girl's voice that I recognized, cut in on it, "Oh, yes, and thank God for it, Freeman!"

One of the internes helped me roll over then and I saw the man lying on the bed next to mine. He had a lot of heavy bandages on his face and head but I recognized him just the same because Miss Longvail had slipped around there when I wasn't looking and now she sat on the edge of the bed with her hand resting on his hand. That's right, it was Freeman Tallant. Suicide is a lot harder to commit than most people realize.

Well, if you read the papers, you'll read that Tallant is dead and in a sense it's true. I've been lying in the Litchfield General Hospital for nearly two weeks now and Tallant has been gone for ten days. I don't know what name he is going by now, but in Europe or wherever they went, I don't believe it matters much.

The boss is sitting near my bed as I write these last lines too. No, I don't mean the Treasury man. He's not my boss any longer. I'm referring to the editor of the *Examiner*. He is sitting there waiting for me to get through with this yarn, so he can carry me back to the city in a special ambulance. He says the paper lost more circulation in the week or so that the "Periscope" didn't appear than it lost when Tallant's suit made a fool of the paper and me. He says he wants me to come back and carry on with my column. He says the Old Man might even listen to some chit-chat about a raise.

So you see I can't go on writing this thing forever.

But there is one little thing that I haven't explained yet. Remember, I mentioned a red-headed wife running the lunch-counter next door to Jimjam's service station? Remember also I mentioned that a red-headed dame called at the Waters place asking for me by my right name?

I haven't told you about those women yet, but I will. Probably you've already worked them into the story to suit your own ideas. Probably you think there might be a third sister in the Longvail family of redheads and that she had her own axe to grind in this fantastic set-up.

But don't you believe it. There was nothing so incredible nor coincidental. Mrs. Mary Legge, wife of the Treasury investigator, used to be her husband's secretary in the Washington office before they were married. She likes the excitement of his brand of detective work. She is a good sport and a good helpmate. Legge didn't want me going around using the name of Smythe. He thought I would be the better red-herring—since that was my job—if I came up there as plain Chad Getty and got the right people worried at once.

So he sent Mary up to visit me and it was Mary who tapped me so neatly on the head and utterly confused me by it. She came to see me the other day at the hospital and said she was sorry. She says she will try to make up for it if I'll come to their little place in New Jersey and let her cook me a good dinner. She tells me it will be a dinner I'll remember.

Jim Legge says Mary is a good cook and so I'm looking forward to it. If she's half as smart at cooking dinners as she is in cooking up gags like that "Petrolator" business, she must be hot stuff. So what can I do but get well?

SHADOW of the NOOSE

by JOHN CREASEY

A brief short story by a

British master of suspense.

CARTER MARTIN went up the narrow stairs to Matt Brewer's office. Every creak of the rotten boards made him flinch. He was trembling, because he dreaded the thought of telling Brewer that he had failed. But he had to do it. Brewer might still find a way of evading the detectives who were waiting in the street outside.

Brewer glared up from the chair in which he was sprawling. "Did you get the letter?" he demanded.

Martin shook his head. "It wasn't there," he muttered. "And I was trailed all the way back. There's a policeman outside, waiting."

Brewer's face went a deep red. "You stupid fool!" he cried. "I ought to blast you apart. What you've done could get me ten years."

Martin didn't reply. He felt

nothing but hate and fear for Brewer. Sometimes when Al Reece was away, he acted as Brewer's chauffeur. He waited at the wheel of the car while Brewer broke into a house, or a block of buildings.

Then the Sparklitz burglary was planned. Sir Benjamin Sparklitz had a collection of diamonds at his house in Barnes. Brewer planned to get the collection, or part of it, and Al Reece was to drive the car.

At the last minute a boy brought a note scrawled in Reece's uneducated hand, addressed to Brewer. Reece had been drunk again. It read: *Can't get to the Sparklitz job. Take Martin.*

Brewer crumpled the note, and flung it on the floor, his face dark with anger. Martin picked it up and put it in his pocket.

"Go get the car," Brewer had growled at last. "I'll settle with Reece afterwards."

The job had been a success. Brewer got the jewels. He was examining them in the office, when he remembered the note.

Martin went through his pockets. He remembered having taken his coat off while he'd looked at the engine of the car, to forestall any suspicion which might have been aroused by the car's nearness to the house. The note was missing.

Brewer had raged and stormed. Martin was quick to suggest that the note had probably fallen in the road outside Sparklitz's house, and Brewer had sent him off to look for it.

He drove the car at breakneck speed through the deserted London streets; but when he reached the Sparklitz house there were lights blazing in every window. The robbery had been discovered, and the police were there.

Sick with fear, Martin had gone back to Aldgate to tell Brewer. Brewer started raging again, then suddenly broke off and went to the window. He stared out in consternation. "Come here, you fool," he said. "Look at that."

Reaching the window, Martin saw what Brewer saw—a lounging figure in the courtyard of the building, his face covered beneath a slouch hat. The man was apparently waiting for Brewer and Martin to try to leave.

Brewer swore, then swung towards Martin.

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR Charles Worth had been waiting to get Brewer and Brewer's associates for some time. That letter, found just outside the Sparklitz house, was nearly enough to tie the job on Matt Brewer.

Worth went with a sergeant and three men to the Aldgate building where Brewer lived. He might get others as well as Brewer if he waited.

Just before dawn a man had come out of the building and had

driven off in Brewer's car. The sergeant had followed him in a police car, to and from the Sparklitz house.

Worth looked at his watch when the man came back. It was 3:30 a. m. Half a dozen men were surrounding the building.

At ten minutes to four the man whom the sergeant had shadowed came out again, and was followed.

Then Worth led the police up the stairs. On the landing outside Brewer's office, the Inspector rapped on the door. There was no answer. He repeated his knock, with the same result.

A policeman put his shoulder to the door and heaved. The lock splintered. The door swung open.

The office was in chaos. Tables and chairs were strewn about, broken to pieces. In the middle of the wreckage lay Matt Brewer. There was a knife wound in his throat.

AT POLICE HEADQUARTERS Martin crouched back from the desk at which Worth sat. On the desk lay the knife which had killed Brewer.

"I didn't kill him!" said Martin. "I swear I didn't. I didn't kill him!"

"You were seen coming out of Brewer's at three-twenty a.m." said Worth. "On your arrest, you immediately protested your innocence. If you didn't kill Brewer,

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

START SCREAMING, MURDERER

A COMPLETE ED RIVERS NOVEL

by TALMAGE POWELL

She was such a tiny lady it was hard to think of her as a key figure in a diabolical murder conspiracy. A mystery yacht in a Florida lagoon, a Latin American political assassination and the death of a dwarf didn't make that tie-in any easier. A fast-paced, excitingly different mystery suspense novel by a master of the genre.

what were you talking about?"

Martin could see the gallows in front of him. "I didn't kill him," he muttered. "I didn't kill him."

"You admit," Worth went on, "that you had been with Brewer all night. You were the last man to see him alive. What happened in the office before you left for a second time?"

Martin remembered Brewer coming towards him, eyes ablaze with murderous fury. He remembered beating Brewer off, getting through the door, somehow.

"I was with Brewer on the Sparklitz robbery," he admitted. "I drove the car, while Brewer went in the house. I took off my coat for a minute, and a letter from Al Reece, an associate of Brewer's, fell out of my pocket.

"It incriminated Brewer and myself so I went back to look for it. When I told Brewer that I couldn't find it, I thought he would kill me."

"What happened then?" demanded Worth.

"Not—much. Brewer showed me the policeman in the courtyard, waiting for us. We were caught, back and front. Then he came for me."

"You say you saw a man in the courtyard?" said Worth. "Are you certain?"

"Yes. Watching our window."

Worth stretched out for a telephone, spoke into it and listened. Then he turned back to Martin.

"I believe you're telling the truth," he said. "And, if you are, you're clear of Brewer's murder. I didn't have a man in the courtyard. I had two in the alley outside, and they're still there.

"If there was a man in the courtyard itself, he wasn't one of my men. And in a matter of minutes I'll know who he is."

"We found the man still hiding in the courtyard," said Inspector Worth to Martin fifteen minutes later. "He was waiting for a chance to get away. It was Al Reece. He quarrelled with Brewer about the loot. I reckon Brewer went for him, but Reece got in first with the knife."

WATCH FOR MORE STORIES BY JOHN CREASEY

THE MILKMAN COMETH

When a milkman turns to crime . . . . the cream can curdle.

by RICHARD CURTIS

NO ONE THOUGHT anything of it when Seth Hubert's milk truck stopped in front of The Bradford Arms fifteen minutes earlier than usual. That was because there was nobody around when it drew in to the curb.

If there had been, he would have observed something else quite out of the ordinary. Seth's basket, except for the handle, was com-

© 1962, by Richard Curtis

pletely swathed in a bath towel. It didn't make even the barest hint of a tinkle as he padded into the apartment house.

This hypothetical observer's dismay would not have ended there, either, for Seth proceeded to do a very strange thing for a milkman. He took the elevator to the twentieth floor, and then walked up to the roof. His olive green uniform blended with the darkness, so that he was hardly more than a shadow as he moved towards the fire escape. Stealthily he treaded the iron steps, his rubber-soled shoes adding not a squeak to the early morning's silence.

He rested the cloth-covered basket on the top landing and reached inside, pulling out a pair of rubber gloves and a diamond-edged glass cutter. He donned the gloves and put the cutter to a pane of glass directly above the midpoint of the window and described a circle of about eight inches in diameter. Then he pushed at the circle.

It gave and fell inaudibly to a carpet. He reached through the hole and flipped the latch and inched the window up.

He entered the Pembrokes' immense, roccoco bedroom and pulled the basket in after him. He reached under the towel again and produced a flashlight and a knife. It took him a few minutes to find Mrs. Pembroke's jewelry box, which she had hidden under the bed, and pry it open with the knife. What he discovered was glorious.

The reflection of the flashlight on the brooches, necklaces, rings and bracelets sent a thousand pencils of light through the room. He lingered a moment over this treasure, then hastily stuffed it into a sack.

He removed several boxes of eggs and butter from his basket and laid the sack in their place. Beside it he put the knife, the flashlight, the glass cutter and the gloves, and covered them with the towel, neatly folded. Then he replaced the butter and eggs and, satisfied that he had left no traces, went to the front door and made his exit.

He stopped next door and delivered a bottle of buttermilk to the Harpers. As he picked up the empty he glanced up as the elevator door swung open. When he saw who it was the bottle dropped from his hands and shattered on the stone floor, sending a ghastly ringing reverberating through the building.

"Why Officer Kirkpatrick, as I live and breathe," Seth said sheepishly, stooping to collect the fragments.

The lanky policeman, wincing from the noise and mess of glass strewn about the hallway, ambled over and kneeled beside Seth.

"Sorry to have given you such a scare," he said, handing Seth some of the larger pieces. "Careful you don't cut yourself."

"Damned clumsy of me," said Seth, taking four quarter-pounds of butter out of a cardboard box and filling it with the broken glass. "What—what are you doing here?"

Suddenly the Harper's door opened and Mrs. Harper, a truculent look on her pudgy face and a rolling pin in her hand, rushed out. Seth and Kirkpatrick leaped out of the way as she came through like a locomotive, murder in her eyes.

"Where is he? I'll crack his skull!" she yammered. "Where is that miserable thief?"

She rushed towards Seth. Kirkpatrick grabbed her from behind. "It's okay, Mrs. Harper, it's okay. It's only the milkman."

She stopped struggling and relaxed, handing over the rolling pin docilely to the policeman. "You haven't caught him?" she said, pouting.

"No, but I'm not on his trail," Kirkpatrick answered. "I hope to make the capture any day now. But you mustn't take the law into your own hands, Mrs. Harper. Someone's bound to get hurt."

"You're darned right," she said. Then she shrugged her shoulders. "Oh well, sorry to raise such a clamor. I thought for sure we had him this time. You'll be sure to let me know the minute you've cornered your man, won't you, Officer?"

Kirkpatrick touched the peak of his hat. "I sure will, Mrs. Harper. Now you go get some sleep."

Frowning, she took the rolling pin from him and ducked inside, bolting the door with conviction.

Seth was trembling violently. "What is this all about?" he managed to ask in an unsteady voice.

"There's a robber in this building."

"Oh?" Seth inquired, his attitude of disinterest not helped at all by the soprano tone in which he asked it.

"Yes," the cop said. "And the lowest kind, too. Steals milk right off people's threshholds. Can you imagine such a thing?"

"Yes. I mean no. Really?"

"Yep. You haven't seen any suspicious looking characters around, have you, Seth?"

"I'm afraid not. But if I do, I'll certainly let you know." He smiled out of the corner of his mouth, then looked at his watch. "Say! I'm falling behind schedule. Better get going before everything gets warm."

Kirkpatrick looked down at the basket, the iron sides of which were sweating. "You ought to carry a little ice in there."

Seth gulped. "A little ice? Yes. I suppose I should. Well, goodbye. Hope you get your man."

Officer Kirkpatrick saluted him amiably.

Seth turned and walked down the hall as fast as a man can walk without appearing to be galloping.

He stopped outside the Slaters' just long enough to drop two rather mushy quarter pounds of salt butter next to their door, and then fled into the elevator, emerging on the nineteenth floor and continuing his deliveries with the echo of Kirkpatrick's pacing above him setting him at sixes and sevens. He covered eighteen more floors in record time.

The morning air, as he trotted to his truck, was the freshest he had ever smelled. The engine had never purred quite as sweetly as this. The burden of his basket had never been such a pleasure to carry. He was very happy that he had not chosen to remain an honest man.

SETH HUBERT had resisted the evil impulse for two summers, but when the third one rolled around he knew he would lose the struggle against temptation. It hadn't been a very fair struggle, he thought as he drew the truck up to the next stop on his route, considering how laughably little Virtue and Righteousness offered compared to the rewards The Plan held out.

Oh yes, Virtue and Righteousness did provide job security and a modest salary and whatever small comforts went with unglamorous things like that, he supposed. But The Plan meant fast money, easy money, big money, and a crack at all the related luxuries.

Furthermore, The Plan was foolproof—or almost so, as this morning's experience served to remind him.

Small wonder it was, then, that when dawn on a certain April morning had cast its rosy light on the familiar trees along his route and showed them to be covered with faint green sprouts, when the bottles in his truck had taken on a mellow ring instead of that harsh jangle caused by the crisp winter air, when the ice blocks melted rather than kept firm for the entire trip, when in short everything pointed to the warm weather, Seth knew the coming summer would be the summer of The Plan.

He refilled his basket and went into the next apartment house. As the elevator rose to the top floor he wondered why he had waited so long to put his scheme into effect. After all, the idea had come to him the very first day on the job that summer almost three years ago. He had completed deliveries to some fifteen or twenty apartments when he found a note in a bottle outside a second floor door. The note said "Please do not leave any milk for the next two weeks. Thank you."

Now why did this family want no milk for the next two weeks? Obviously because it was going on vacation. And that meant the flat would be vacant. And *that* meant it would be a perfect setup for a burglary.

During the rest of that first summer he had picked up similar

notes regularly, and each time the same thought occurred to him: *what a perfect setup for a burglary!*

So why hadn't he done anything about it? Just because he'd spent a little time in stir? But that was foolish. That burglary he'd pulled had been so ridiculously amateurish it served him right for getting caught. But this was different. Now he was older, shrewder, more careful, his outlook so much more professional, his technique far more polished, the setup a thousand times easier.

At the same time prison had put the fear of retribution in him. His mouth had still been bitter with the taste of prison food, his limbs still sore and cramped from the restrictions of his small cell. He hadn't spent much time in stir, but even the short term was enough to make him think twice about risking it again.

It was the same story the following summer. Even though the painful memory of those long, lonely months had all but faded, his impulses were subconsciously blocked by that sharp rap on the knuckles the law had administered to him not too long before. Also there was something to say for the straight and narrow. It wasn't very adventurous and the money was far from abundant, but it had its compensations.

But as time went on the the remembrance of those free-wheeling, free spending days between that heist and the dark moment of his capture gradually replaced that other, bleaker memory, temptation returned stronger than ever. It grew to the proportions of an obsession over that second winter; by March all his moral defenses had crumbled.

And so on that particular April morning, as he picked up the empties and put them in his basket, placing two quarts here, three quarts there, a pound of butter for Mrs. Smith and a dozen eggs for Mrs. Jones, and especially whenever he came across those significant "Nothing today, thank you" memos curled in the necks of empties along the way, Seth Hubert knew come summer he would trod the straight an narrow no more.

Aside from his usual chores he spent the rest of the spring making careful observations of the fire escapes of certain apartments whose owners he knew, from two summers' experience, went away for a week or two during July or August. He had no intention of pulling too many heists in spite of the thirty or forty opportunities he knew he would have, for otherwise the police would fall upon the suspicious connection between the pattern of the robberies and his milk route.

Just a choice half dozen or so was all it would take. It was a wealthy neighborhood on the upper west side, so a few places

would provide all he needed. Since apartments on the upper stories rented for a premium because of their desirable view of the city, he picked them as his objectives, knowing their occupants had more wherewithal than the riff-raff down below. The top stories were the best bets too, because he wouldn't have to sneak past the windows of occupied apartments.

"No second story man *me*," Seth said to himself with a chuckle.

He got his first chance when the Pembrokes went away the second week in July. The note, written in Mrs. Pembroke's cultivated hand on deluxe magenta stationery and tucked just so into the bottle's neck, said "I will appreciate a discontinuance of service, dear Milkman, until further notice, probably two weeks. Vacation, you know. Bermuda this year. Cuba is out, of course. Ta ta."

Dear old Mrs. Pembroke, always writing as if her notes to the milkman would some day be collected and published in a slim, Morocco-bound volume. "Well, dear old Mrs. Pembroke would be in for quite a shock as she *ta-ta'd* in from sunny Bermuda," Seth said to himself at the end of the day as he assessed his haul and hid it in a box at the back of his hall closet.

His next three jobs were just as routine—more so, in fact, since there was no Officer Kirkpatrick on the prowl for wicked bottle snatchers—and just as lucrative. The box in his closet was filled almost to the top with diamonds and emeralds, rubies and sapphires, gold, silver, platinum, and lesser stones and metals.

One or two more jobs ought to set him for fair, then off to market he would go with his booty, and afterwards a milkman's holiday in exotic climes.

The next place on his list was the Harringtons'. The note in their bottle was curt, as usual. "No milk for a week, please," was all it said.

Seth would take a personal as well as professional pleasure in hitting the Harringtons. Their order was sparse—one bottle of milk every other day—their notes concise and haughty, contemptuously putting the milkman in his proper place, and their Christmas tips abominably scant. They could do with a little humbling, Seth thought with warm anticipation.

Two days later he entered their living room from the fire escape. As he flashed his light around he was a bit surprised to find that there were no sheets over the furniture to protect it, as had been the case in the other four vacated apartments. But this was no doubt because they were only gone for a week. He tiptoed through a foyer towards the bedroom, the floorboards squeaking as he made his way.

He stopped for a moment outside the bedroom door. It was closed and he thought he heard a

movement behind it. The hairs on his neck began to tingle, his hands to sweat profusely under the rubber gloves. Something funny was going on. Things weren't the way they should be. He wondered if he should turn back. He shrugged his shoulders, attributing it to nerves.

He pushed the door open and went in, shining the beam on a couple of dressers, a vanity and a highboy. Then he played it on the bed, and his mouth dropped open.

There was a woman in it, her eyes wide in horror.

She let out a scream. He turned to run. There was a rustle behind him and then a sudden sharp pain on the back of his skull. The world flashed blue. The word "bop" lit up in red neon in front of his eyes, as though he were Tom in a Tom and Jerry cartoon and the mouse had just gleefully crowned him with a tire iron. It was funny and then it was not funny. The parquet floor made an interesting design as it came up and struck him in the mouth.

He vaguely heard a man's voice saying "It's all right, Mary, I got him."

Then it was dark. He dreamt he was drowning in a batter of buttermilk, egg yolks and sweet butter.

When he opened his eyes later there were four people standing around him. The nearest one was in blue and pointed a heavy revolver at him. It was Kirkpatrick. Behind him was a man in a grey suit, and next to him Mr. Harrington, distinguished if a bit paunchy, clad in a navy bathrobe with a maroon velvet collar. Mrs. Harrington, her hair in curlers, wearing a lacy, flowing dressing gown, kept her distance well behind them.

Seth's skull throbbed violently and sent pain shooting through him with every movement of his eyes. There was a high pitched ringing in his ears and he wondered if it would ever stop. He decided he was doomed to go through life with A above high C always in the background.

Kirkpatrick said to the man in the grey suit, "Think this might be the same guy who hit the Pembrokes and the Tates and those other two, Lieutenant?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," the Lieutenant answered. "We'll have to check his home out for the loot if he won't tell us himself. Ah, here's our pigeon now."

They gazed down at Seth as he stirred. Kirkpatrick wiggled his gun ominously and shook his head at Seth in a shame-on-you gesture.

Seth brought his focus on Harrington. "I thought you were away on vacation," he protested, as if Harrington had welched on a bargain and he had every right to feel indignant about it.

"We were," Harrington said drily, still wielding the crystal ashtray which would no doubt sound a high 'A' if anyone cared to tap it with his medulla.

"But you're not now," Seth whined.

"That's quite true, and lucky for us we're not."

"But that note. You left a note in your milk bottle saying you didn't want any milk for a week."

The Lieutenant leaned forward. "So you figured he would be away this week and you decided to rob the place, is that right?"

Seth nodded, sending a new series of shock waves resounding through his head.

"And that's how you pulled the other jobs, isn't it? Come on, Hubert, we'll find out one way or another."

Seth nodded again, this time in 'A' flat. At least in this respect things were looking up.

Suddenly Harrington started to laugh. His laughter grew louder and louder, his face growing red and his paunch shaking like a beanbag.

"Now what's so damned funny?" asked Seth in a hurt tone, seeing nothing damned funny in the situation at all.

"My dear fellow, we went on vacation last week."

"Last week?"

"Why yes, but we forgot to leave you a note stopping milk delivery. When we returned we found several bottles in the refrigerator. Evidently the superintendent brought them in. Since we had enough milk for a week we put a note in the bottle telling you to discontinue, so that we could drink the surplus in the refrigerator."

Harrington was still laughing as the Lieutenant and Kirkpatrick ushered Seth Hubert down the hall.

"I should have quit after the Pembrokes," Seth said bitterly. "There was enough there to put me on easy street."

"But like so many stupid criminals," the Lieutenant said with a wry smile, "you weren't content to put all your eggs—and milk—in one basket."

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(Continued from other side)

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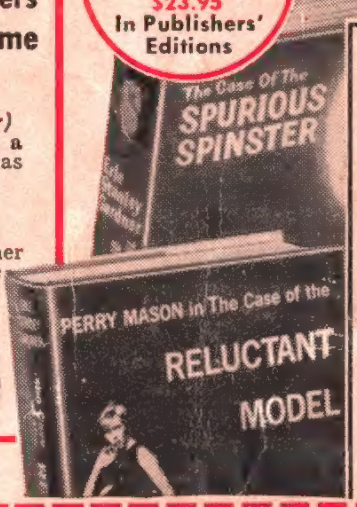

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